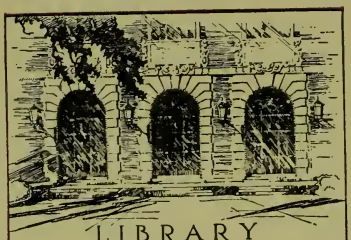
A Dog with a Bad Name

Florence Warden.

Michael Sadleir



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A DOG WITH A BAD NAME.

BY

FLORENCE WARDEN,

AUTHOR OF

"THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH" AND "AT THE WORLD'S MERCY."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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PREFACE.

THE following story originally appeared in The Family Herald as "The Iron Hand." That title, however, having been left behind by the story in the course of writing, has now been discarded in favour of one with more meaning, "A Dog with a Bad Name."

February 3, 1885.

A DOG WITH A BAD NAME.

CHAPTER I.

"PLEASE, master, there's a baby in the shed along o' the carts."

It was a grinning Norfolk yokel, with a permanent expression of idiotic amusement on his round face, who made this announcement to Farmer Corbyn, putting his head shyly round the door of the farm-kitchen, and looking straight at the fire as he did so.

The farmer, who was at tea, turned slowly and stared at him.

"Go along for a fool, Sam, and tell yer daft stories to some one else."

Sam half withdrew his sandy head, then thrust it in again, looking stupidly from the

farmer to the farmer's wife, with wide-mouthed intensity, which attracted Mr. Corbyn's attention; turning suddenly in his chair, he caught his wife in the act of making signs to the lad.

"Hallo, what's up, Molly?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing! Go along, Sam, with your silly stories."

"No, Sam; stay! I must get to the bottom of this. What's all this bother and mystery you're cocking up together? What's——"

"Good gracious, John, you needn't put yourself about like that, and all for nothing, too! You can run away, Sam."

"Sam, come in here!" roared the farmer, cutting short his wife's conciliatory speeches by a thump on the table.

The lad brought himself fearfully round the door and into the room, casting a glance at his mistress as if to ascertain that he was doing right.

"Now, what's all this noise about a baby? Where is it, and whose is it?"

"Please, master, it's a sittin' on a sack under one of the hay-waggons; and I don't rightly know whose is it; but——"

And again he turned his round eyes helplessly but expressively towards the farmer's wife. She was a bright-looking woman, some years younger than her husband, to whom she had not been long married. She began to laugh at the angry wonder in the latter's face, and put her hand upon his shoulder.

"It is all right, John; there's nothing to be angry about. Only a woman came knocking at the door to-day—and—and asking the way, and she seemed very tired; so I asked her just to step in and have a cup of tea, as she'd a little child with her. I know you don't like strange people coming into the house; but she wasn't a tramp, John; she was quite respectably dressed and well-spoken, though she was Irish, I think."

"So I see this is what comes of your bringing your tramps into the house, that they leave their brats about the place for you to saddle yourself with. You made a fuss with the little wretch, I'll be bound—told the mother you wished you had one like it, or something of the sort—till your smart well-spoken tramp takes it into her head that she can't do better than get rid of her encumbrance at your door."

"In the shed, master," corrected Sam.

"But perhaps she is coming back again; perhaps she has taken it away by this time. The child may have strayed away from her and got back here of its own accord; it was a sharp, pretty little thing," said Mrs. Corbyn, enthusiastically, moving towards the door with evident anxiety to see the child again.

"Not likely; the woman knows her business! You stay here, Molly; I'm not going to have my house turned into a foundling hospital. Sam shall take the brat to the workhouse, and there the mother can fetch it if she likes."

"But it is such a dear little thing, John. Do let me bring it in here for a moment; it will be so terribly cold after being left out there."

"No, it won't be cold, missis, for Master James was a-cuddlin' of it."

"Master James!"

"Yes," answered Sam. "When I asked whose the baby was, he said it were his'n; and I left 'em in the shed among the cocks and hens, and I come to tell you."

"All right!" said the farmer, slapping on

his hat and snatching up his stick in a threatening manner.

"Oh, don't hurt it, master!" broke out Sam, alarmed.

Mr. Corbyn was already on the door-step; and as Sam followed, with slow and clumsy gait, his mistress said in a low voice—

"Don't be a fool, Sam; he won't hurt the babe. He'll be the first to be kind to it, whatever he may say. So hold your noise. Here, let me pass!"

She passed him, and followed her husband out of the house, and over the ground in front, heavy with October rains, towards the long shed where the carts and waggons were kept. It was dusk by this time; but, before they could see anything human, the exploring party caught the sounds of the voices of children and the shrieks of a fowl.

"Fetch a light, Sam!" said the farmer.

In the mean time, guided by the voices, he made his way to the end of the shed nearest to the cart-way, and, half under a scarlet waggon, found, as Sam had said, a little girl of about three years old trying to pull the

feathers out of an unfortunate chicken which she held in her arms; while a boy, some five years older than herself, sitting beside her with one arm round her chubby neck, did his best, not to protect the chicken, but to protect his tyrannical companion from the beak and claws of the creature she was tormenting.

The sudden appearance of the farmer bending over them in the dusk startled the children, and made them look up. The little girl did not let her victim go, but hugged it with obstinate clutch, as she looked up at the big man's hand stretched out to rescue her prize. The boy threw his other arm round her, and joined his hands round her neck.

"Do-on't," cried the object of his chivalrous attentions lustily, as she tried to free herself from his protecting embrace.

"Let her be, Master James; she'll give ye naught but scratches for yer pains, like the rest of her kind," said the farmer.

At the sound of his gruff voice, the girl looked up again, with curiosity, but without any fear. Mr. Corbyn stood aside to let the little light there was left fall on her face, and as, against

the background of gloom in the shed, a pair of great beaming dark eyes met his, looking intently out of a cherub's face surrounded by an untidy tangle of very fair hair, he stooped lower and grunted.

"Bless my soul, it's a pretty bairn!" he muttered, when he had finished his inspection. "Here, Molly!"

Turning, he found his wife beside him.

"We'd better take the brat in, and give it something to eat. These tramps' children are always hungry; I believe they train 'em to it. Then we can see about packing it off," he added sternly, repressing a look of triumph he saw on his wife's face.

"All right, John," said she; and she pushed past him eagerly, and began her work of mercy by releasing the chicken. The child struggled with all her strength to retain her prey, but did not scream; her resentment took the still more unamiable form of an attempt to bite Mrs. Corbyn's hand.

"Now let her go, Master James, there's a good boy! I am not going to hurt her. She'll catch her death of cold, sitting here in this

damp shed. Dear, dear, her poor little feet are wet through. Come, let me take her in; and you can come in too, and have a piece of cake; and then you must run home to the Hall. Sir Charles won't like your being out so late, and I don't know what Miss Elizabeth would say if she saw the state you are in. Good gracious! and you've got your best clothes on too!"

With a sudden wrench, more violent in this new excitement than any she had yet used, she parted him from his lady-love, and dragged him up to be examined. An hour's sitting in the mud had a good deal spoilt the appearance of his black velvet knickerbockers, and he had torn his scarlet stockings on a nail. Mrs. Corbyn, who knew that that velvet suit, rusty-looking as it was getting and short at the wrists and knees, was meant to last some time longer, was aghast.

"Never mind, Mrs. Corbyn. Now they'll have to get me trousers," said the boy, coaxingly, lifting a pair of gentle blue eyes from the damaged clothes to her face.

"No; they won't do that, my boy, if it's

only because you want to have them," said she injudiciously.

And the blood flew to the boy's cheeks, as he turned from her, and ran after the little waif, who had got upon her feet and was toddling away.

"I think you'd better run straight home, Master James; your clothes are so wet. I'll take care of the child, you may be sure!"

"No, no; I'm going to take her home with me. She's going to be my sister, and to marry me when she grows up—aren't you, Deldee?"

But the young lady had sat down in the mud again, outside the shed this time, and showed no interest in the question, being absorbed in watching the approach of the lantern which Sam was bringing. When, however, Mrs. Corbyn took her up to carry her indoors, she suddenly gave a short scream, and stretched out two plump arms towards the boy, kicking an intimation that she wanted to be put down. He rushed responsively up to where her little muddy boots were dangling wildly from Mrs. Corbyn's arms; but the farmer's wife was equal to the occasion.

"Hush, hush! Be a good girl, and you shall have some bread-and-jam—nice bread-and-jam; I'll take you indoors and give you some beautiful bread-and-jam."

And the wild legs grew suddenly calm; and, repeating "Bed-and-dam—boofer bed-and-dam!" the young lady instantly forgot her disconsolate admirer, and let herself be carried indoors and placed on a chair by the fire and divested of her boots and socks, quite amiably. The bright light of the fire and of the lamp dazzled and amused her, and she sat blinking her great brown eyes quietly, and curling up her little pink toes in the warm glow of the fire, in a manner which completed her subjugation of the farmer, who sat opposite to her, with his hands on his knees, wagging his head and making strange sounds with his tongue, in a weak attempt to render himself engaging to one of her years. She stared at him gravely, and, having been provided with the promised delicacy, went on steadily attempting the feat of eating the jam and leaving the bread behind.

"Don't forget the other one," said the farmer presently, jerking his head in the direction of

the end of the table, where James Otway stood looking wistfully across the well-laden board at his inconstant little lady-love.

The boy grew crimson, and shyly moved away; but the farmer's wife laid her kindly hands on his shoulders, and brought him round to the fire, where he at first refused refreshment, but melted at the sight of a huge piece of cake, and then stood by the baby's chair quietly munching, and feeding her with bits of cake when she had grown tired of her own bread-and-jam.

"How did you find her, Master James?" asked the farmer.

"I was in the pine-wood with Tip, when he started off after a rabbit or something, and I followed him round this way along the farm-yard wall; and then I lost sight of him, and I saw a woman carrying a baby. And she put her into the shed, and she was crying; and I saw her put a letter into the little thing's hand——"

"A letter! Where is it?"

"She's eaten it up; I saw her. I was standing near the meadow-gate by the side of

the house, and the woman had her back to me. Then Tip came running up, and began chivying the ducks; so I went through the gate after him, and when I came back the woman was gone, and the baby had torn up the letter, and was swallowing the pieces. So I took the rest away from her, all I could——"

"And what did you do with the pieces?"

"I don't know. She was scratching me and hitting me so—of course she didn't know any better, poor little thing!—I didn't notice what became of the letter. It was all in little pieces."

"We must look for those pieces, Molly, and see if we can make anything out of them. You see she did mean to leave the child—that's plain enough for even you to believe. But I'll have her hunted out, and made to answer for herself—that I will! Leaving a poor babe like that at a stranger's door! The wench ought to be ashamed of herself!"

"Well, let us find the rest of the letter first, John, if we can. Perhaps she gave some explanation there."

"Explanation! A child left in a shed before

the door of a simple little fool who has evidently taken a fancy to it, explains itself. It doesn't want no letter to show that the mother is tired of her encumbrance, and thinks she's done well in foisting it on a soft-hearted creature like you. But she reckoned without your husband, Mrs. Corbyn, and I'm not ready to be put upon in that way, if you are."

And the farmer rose from his chair, put on his hat again, and walked out of the house, taking with him the lantern which Sam had brought. The little grave-faced lad watched him closely, keeping one hand upon the baby-girl's plump fist all the time. As soon as the door closed upon her husband, Mrs. Corbyn abandoned herself freely to her affectionate instincts towards the child, and, taking the rather unwilling mite into her arms, she half-smothered it with kisses.

"Mr. Corbyn wants to send her away," said the boy's voice, quietly but apprehensively.

"Oh, I think I can persuade him to let me keep her!" said the young woman, cheerily.

"Then, when you have children of your own you won't care about her. You'll let her run

about by herself just as they do me, and only bring her in to scold her."

"Just hark at him preaching! Why, I declare, Master James, you're for all the world like a parson already, with your grave face and your grave ways!"

"I'm not going to be a parson."

"Ah, that'll have to be as Sir Charles likes! Time enough to think of that when you're ten years older. You're but a child now, and you don't know what's best."

"I know what I like, and I'm not going to be a parson; I'm going to be a poacher."

"Hush, hush! What would your uncle say if he could hear you? Fancy a young gentleman that's going to be a baronet wanting to be a poacher!"

"Bashford says when I'm a baronet I can do as I like. So, when my uncle dies, I shall have trousers and be a poacher."

"You shouldn't talk like that about your uncle; it isn't right. You wouldn't like him to die, just so as you might do as you liked, surely?"

"I don't know. My uncle isn't kind to me,

and Aunt Elizabeth isn't kind—I hate Aunt Elizabeth—and Aunt Eleanor hardly ever speaks to me. If I could do as I liked, I would go right away, and live in the woods and eat roots and rabbits and never learn anything."

"Bless the boy! You live in the woods pretty near now, I think." She was interrupted by her husband's voice shouting to her, and the light died out of her face as she said, "I must go; that's Mr. Corbyn calling. Perhaps the woman has come back for her child. Take care she doesn't fall into the fire, Master James. Good-bye, my precious," she added to the baby-girl, with a sounding kiss, before she threw her apron round her head and ran out.

Her fears were groundless; the baby's mother had not returned. Her husband wanted the help of her quick eyes in searching for the tiny torn scraps of paper which were all that remained of the letter which might perhaps have thrown some light upon the pretty little waif's history. After a long and careful search, some half-dozen small pieces of paper, covered with that puzzling writing of the very illiterate which, examined in fragments, has about as

much meaning upside down as right side up, were all they could find in the mud inside and outside the shed. No ingenuity could arrange a connected whole out of these scanty fragments; yet very little imagination was apparently needed to tell them a common, but sad story; "but a poor girl," "wrong, but," "was a gentleman," "its father"—these words could be traced out among others with enough distinctness to enable the farmer and his wife to guess the rest. They had made this out by the light of the lantern; and as the woman examined the last bit of paper, she looked up at her husband appealingly.

"Oh, John, let's keep her! I'm sure she'll be a blessing to us!" she urged, falling into the usual formula.

"A blessing! I don't know so much about that. She's got a temper of her own, for one thing; and, for another, she hasn't the pedigree I should choose for a girl to bring up as my own. A gentleman and a tramp! Good stock to come of! Why, my girl, she'd never keep out of gaol, coming of such parentage!"

"Oh, John, if you think she is in such danger

as that, then it's all the more reason we should take care of her and try to keep her honest and good. Come in and look at her again, John; and, look here—to-morrow morning we'll go to the Vicar and ask his advice."

"A lot o' good it'll be askin' the Vicar! 'Think it out and act for the best'—that's what he'll say. Oh, a thorough-going Protestant is Mr. Bamber! 'Make yer own religion and stick to it, and save me a deal o' trouble'—that might be Mr. Bamber's motto; and you can talk him over easy too, you women with your tongues. Oh, yes, a deal——"

He would have gone on with his comments on this—a favourite topic—if he had not been interrupted by a shriek from his wife, who had entered the farm-kitchen first. He quickened his steps, and, entering, found her white and trembling, leaning against the table. The child was gone! The farmer was as much disturbed as his wife. Together they looked under the table, in the cupboards, in every corner. Mrs. Corbyn was at the door to search the passage and the parlour, when her husband stopped her.

"I have it, Molly! The boy's gone too; he's taken her away. Let's have the fields searched. They'll be hiding under some hedge; and the little one's voice is pretty sure to guide us before long."

"He's taken her home to the Hall with him, I expect, John. I'll go straight there first, while you and the lads hunt about, if you like; but I'm pretty sure I shall find them."

"Are you now? Well, then, I'll set Sam to search the farmyard, and I'll go with you. Look sharp, lass; never trouble for to get your best bonnet."

But, instead of obeying, she stopped short, with the light of an inspiration in her eyes. The expression of her face was unmistakable; she had found out something, or fancied that she had.

"Well, what is it, lass? You've found a mare's nest, I see!" said her husband, encouragingly.

"No, John, I haven't," she rejoined very quietly; "but it'll be an odd thing if we find the child at Waringham Hall."

"Why? What's the mystery? Come,

you're burning to make a real romantic story out of this, I see, Molly! Out with it."

"It's nothing, John; only that the questions the woman asked me to-day were nearly all about Waringham Hall, and the people in it."

"Like enough a gipsy—wanted to find out the easiest way of robbing the place, and whether there were plenty of silly maid-servants about, whose fortunes she could tell."

"But how many times am I to tell you, John, that she wasn't a tramp no more than I am? Why, you might see that yourself from the way the child was dressed!"

"Why, they were just common clothes."

"Yes, but not a tramp's odds and ends, picked up anywhere from anybody, I know. And I tell you it was not chance that brought her to Waringham."

"No; it was a caravan, I'll lay. But what have you got in your head now, Molly?"

"Nothing; only I believe that letter would have told us more than you think for. It might have opened our eyes, John."

"Well, it seems to have loosened our

tongues as it is. Look here; you be a sensible lass, and don't go prating to Mrs. This and Mrs. That all the silly fancies that come into your head; or, mind, if you do, off that baby goes to the workhouse."

"Then you will let me keep it, John?"

"Well, I don't know; I must just think it over; for, mind, it's a responsibility. A child isn't a thing to be picked up and then chucked away when you're tired of it, or when you have something else you like better to take its place. And, mind you, if I thought there was anything in your wild fancies about Waringham, I'd leave the child under a hedge rather than take it in. But there's nobody about the place but Mr. Johnson, the butler; and I'm sure he's not the sort of man——"

"But Mr. Johnson's not a gentleman, John. You know in the woman's letter it said 'a gentleman.'"

"He's a gentleman to the likes of her; and, goodness, you wouldn't suspect Sir Charles——"

"No, no, of course, that's true; I'd forgotten there was only Sir Charles now," inter-

rupted his wife, hastily. "Yes, how silly of me! Of course there's nobody it could be."

"Your wits have had a rare time of it wool-gathering to-day, Molly; now let's have a little sense for a change. Here we are at the gate; don't walk on the grass, you'll get your feet wet. You ask for Mrs. Symes, and I'll wait for you."

"Heaven send the baby's safe, John," whispered she, slipping her hand through her husband's arm as they made their way along the narrow path under the thick-growing trees of the park, over the wet leaves, through the dense October night-mist.

"Amen to that!" said he, rather huskily.

CHAPTER II.

Waringham Hall was a big, ugly white house, built in the time of George the Third, and so picturesquely placed among the oaks of the park, with the ground sloping gently from the front, that not all the efforts of the architect, not even his freak of hiding away the principal entrance round the corner of the house and surmounting it with a hideous brick portico, could in summer make it look quite the dreary barrack his fancy had imagined. But, on this cold October evening, with the mist rising slowly up about the bare white walls and the almost leafless oaks standing stiffly round, stretching out gaunt crooked fingers above the thick vapour that was gradually enshrouding them, the Hall, with its meagre lights seen dimly through the blinds of some half-dozen of

the windows, looked from the outside hardly less cheerless than a family vault.

And the inside corresponded with the outside. Commodious rooms half-warmed, half-lighted—copies of Rubens and Murillo lining the carved oak staircase, and one feeble lamp in the hall below to see them by. Otway ladies of the past in satin and diamonds, painted by Reynolds and Gainsborough, on the walls; Otway ladies of the present, in dyed-stuffs and cheap shoes, leading the dullest of lives within the dreary hall. Corridors lined with unused rooms, massive silver candlesticks with unlighted candles in them, old furniture in the taste of past generations—all spoke of dwindled hospitality and declining fortunes.

The sonorous measured voice of a middle-aged manservant was calling through the halls and on the staircase, "Master James, Master James!" with subdued respectfulness which threatened to turn into something quite different when he should succeed in catching the young gentleman in question. Getting no answer, after having opened the doors of several rooms and muttered, "I'll give it you when I do catch

you, my young gentleman!" as he shook the heavy curtains of the old bedsteads, he walked downstairs again and listened for a few moments at the door of the drawing-room. It was only to find out whether his prey was there; Sir Charles and his two middle-aged sisters never had anything to talk about interesting enough to tempt the ear of the most curious of servants; and Johnson knew the anatomy of every skeleton in the Waringham cupboards as well as—well, as most people. He could hear Miss Eleanor's cough, he could hear Miss Elizabeth's rather sharp voice and Sir Charles's acquiescent grunt; but, as the lady did not seem to be scolding anybody, Johnson concluded that her nephew was not there; and he returned to the servants' hall to join in the discussion of the event of the day.

The Bishop and two or three of the gentlemen of the neighbourhood had lunched at Waringham Hall that day, on the occasion of the consecration of a new burial-ground, and Sir Charles and his sisters were talking it over—that is to say, Miss Elizabeth Otway was passing their guests in review, and her brother

and sister were listening with now and then a modest comment.

Sir Charles was a small, slight, fair man of about forty, with an aquiline nose and a retreating chin, who was only saved from utter insignificance by his upright bearing, due to twelve years' inactive service in a line regiment. The same features, which expressed nothing in particular in his face, were full of significance in the face of his sister Elizabeth, who was a few years younger than himself, and who had in her girlhood borne a reputation for good looks, which the amount of admiration they excited in the lymphatic gentlemen of the county scarcely justified, but which strengthened her position as leading spirit in the family circle. Her manners were good, though imperious, her complexion was still delicate, her fair hair still pretty, her cold blue eyes still bright, and her dress, in spite of the rigid economy they were all forced to practise, was dainty with old lace and jewelry which had been in the family for generations. She was not the eldest daughter of the late Sir James Otway; but she had managed, in this as in other matters, to get

more than her fair share of such good things as came in her way. Sir Charles had always been very submissive to her, and almost the only point on which he had made a firm stand against her superior judgment had been that of his marriage; in spite of all her attempts to persuade or to entrap him into a match which would supply that need of money which, as times grew worse and tenants gave up their farms, or required their rents lowered, got more desperate every day, he obstinately persisted in remaining a bachelor.

Eleanor, the eldest of the family, was a shrivelled and shrunken brunette, short, sallow, and insignificant, who followed her sister's lead dutifully in most things—spent a lazy life in shivering and lounging from room to room with a little woollen shawl round her shoulders, and in avoiding the fresh air, and who only became plaintive over such misfortunes as five minutes' delay in the arrival of the mid-day chop and glass of sherry with which her discriminating fragility had to be sustained. She had no manners to speak of, and her powers of conversation were limited to trifling subjects

connected with religion of the uncompromising sort ; but, for all that, she was far more popular in the household than her sister.

They sat together by the small fire with which the space round the worn white skin hearthrug was economically half warmed, in the little circle of light cast by a lamp and Sir Charles's reading-candle. This oasis in the two big, bare, lofty rooms, with its spindle-legged sofa for Eleanor, a work-table with the frayed silk cover neatly darned, a couple of uncomfortable armchairs, a reading-table, a footstool, a fire-screen, and a cushion for the cat, was the only habitable spot in the expanse of comfortless gloom. Huge fires in both fire-places and an outlay in candles which would have made the ladies shudder could hardly have made the rooms cheerful, for the floor was covered by a pale carpet strewn with a pattern of faded garlands connected by curly ribbons : a bleak-looking light-coloured paper, stained in many places with damp, hung on the walls, while the doors and wainscoting were white, picked out with tarnished gilding. Old-fashioned furniture of the slim and fragile

order, much of it covered with worn wool-work of ugly and conventional design by the busily idle fingers of past generations of Otway ladies, sprinkled the wilderness sparsely, arranged in little groups of a table and two chairs, an ottoman and two footstools, with a prim attempt at inviting the *tête-à-têtes* which never took place there, for visitors instinctively made for the oasis.

"Don't you think the Bishop laughs and talks politics rather too much for one in his position, Elizabeth?" asked her sister meekly. "Mr. Bamber and Canon Gillingham both tried to draw him into discussion of more serious matters, and each time I noticed that he avoided it."

"Discussion with Canon Gillingham is such a very serious matter, that I think we may forgive him, Eleanor."

Then Miss Elizabeth turned the subject.

"Everything would have gone well but for James. Really that boy is the most ungrateful, unmanageable child I ever met, Charles!"

"What did he do? I thought he seemed very quiet," said Eleanor.

"Yes; he was quiet as long as we wanted him to be bright and talkative. But here, after luncheon, when the Admiral had opened the *Pilgrim's Progress* and was looking over it with him, when he came to the picture of Christian going away, he said, 'And who are all those unkind people laughing at him?' and James answered quite loudly, 'I suppose they are his uncles and aunts.' And of course it was in a pause, when everybody was listening. And it is just the sort of story that will get about, and make people think we treat the ungrateful, tiresome child badly. I meant to have spoken to him about it when they were all gone, but of course he knew he had been naughty and ran out to play—in his best clothes. He ought to be here now to say good-night—it is half-past six. Charles, will you ring?"

Her brother obeyed, and Johnson appeared, like a dignified ghost in the gloom beyond the lamplight.

"How is it Master James is not here, Johnson?"

"I can't find him, ma'am. Susan saw him

going upstairs with his arms full of sweets that had been left from luncheon, that he had taken off the dishes; and now Mr. and Mrs. Corbyn have come to complain that he has stolen a baby, ma'am."

"Stolen a baby?"

"Yes, ma'am. I've been looking for them, and they are all looking for them; but we can't find any trace of either of them, except some jelly on the stairs."

"Dear me, this is a very extraordinary story!" said Sir Charles, rising, glad to have something to walk about for. "Where are Mr. and Mrs. Corbyn?"

"In Mrs. Symes's room, sir."

"Ask them to come into the study."

The library, which was devoted to Sir Charles's use, was the only comfortable room in the house. A screen round the fireplace protected its owner's eyes from the sight of the books, which he disliked; and his armchair had been used by him and his father before him till all the buttons had come off and most of the surface of the leather had been worn away, while the horsehair stuffing stuck out in

several places and tempted James, when no one was in the room, to pull it out to put on the hedges for the birds to build their nests with.

It was here that Mr. and Mrs. Corbyn told Sir Charles the story of the appearance and disappearance of the little waif. They had scarcely finished it when Johnson knocked at the door and announced respectfully, but with suppressed excitement—

"We've found them, sir, both together, up in the bachelors' wing!"

Sir Charles led the way through the hall, telling the farmer and his wife to follow, and calling to his sisters as he passed the drawing-room door. He had caught the excitement; and, snatching the candles from Johnson's hands, he charged up the stairs at the head of the party, with as much enthusiasm as if he had been leading a forlorn hope, spilling the wax at every step, and at last upsetting one candle with a crash into the hall below. Johnson, who had been in the army himself, and who was as active as his master, except when in the presence of "the family," had run round

up the back staircase to warn the rest of the household—all assembled to see the baby Master James had run away with—of the approach of the master of the house. They were gathered round the door which led to the bachelors' wing, a dusty, deserted old corridor where no bachelors were ever found now, except among the rats and mice who picked up but a poor living among the worm-eaten furniture and mouldy hangings of the rooms which had once held keen sportsmen, mad lovers, charming younger sons—dead now, most of them—and the rest—fogeys.

Mrs. Symes, the housekeeper, had selfishly drawn the bolt of the outer door, under pretence of not disturbing the child, who was asleep; and she and the cook were standing in the third bedroom, watching the little waif, who was lying on a musty old settee, when Johnson's voice calling to them that Sir Charles was coming, made them hurry out and withdraw the bolt, just as the master of the house and his panting suite came up.

"Well, where is the lost princess, Mrs. Symes?"

"In the third room, sir," answered the housekeeper, who was a tall, thin, melancholy woman, always regretting the bygone glories of the family at the time when she had just entered their service as kitchen-maid, though her slowness of thought, speech, and action and her lugubrious aspect would have been as much out of place in her present post in the good old times of Waringham wealth and hospitality as they were in harmony with it now that the tide of fortune had turned against the Otways.

She led the way with her own candle and the one Sir Charles had been dropping about, which she respectfully relieved him of, to the third of the row of doors which ran along the left-hand side of the corridor, the right-hand side being occupied by windows overlooking some out-buildings and the stable-yard.

"Master James is with her, sir, and he won't let anybody touch the child. She's asleep, sir," continued the housekeeper, as she pushed the door open and ushered her master into a mouldy-smelling bedroom, the boards of the floor of which rattled under the tread. The mildewed paper was in places peeling from the

outer wall; the death-watch ticked in the wainscoting; what little furniture had been left in the disused room looked doubly old and mean and worn, seen by the dim and flickering light of the candles held over the low old-fashioned cushioned seat on to which James the kidnapper had helped his prize to climb. He had thought, in a vague child's way, that, if he could manage to bring her unseen to this old corridor where nobody ever came, he could keep her there till she grew up, and then he could marry her, and they could go away together somewhere—to some wood, or to sea, and they could take Tip, the fox-terrier, with them. He could easily bring her food from the pantry, where Johnson, who scolded him more fiercely than anybody, but who was the only person who ever treated him to a little harmless spoiling, might make a fuss about his depredations, but somehow always forgot to lock him out. And now that nasty old griffin—this was Mrs. Symes—had hunted him out, and come creeping down the corridor, and he had listened with a fast-beating heart while she opened each creaking door. He had blown out his candle,

drawn a curtain over the baby-girl, and hidden himself under the bed. But it was in vain; the rasping, "Come out; I see you!" so familiar to children's ears, had been followed by the grip of a strong bony hand upon his nearest leg; and he had been dragged out in a very inconsiderate manner, and forced to give an account of himself and the baby, whom the housekeeper's sharp eyes had in the mean time discovered.

Now, crouched beside his treasure in the presence of his uncle, with his Aunt Elizabeth and the avenging Corbyns in the background, he felt that the end of all things was come. His imagination for horrors, like that of all children who are much neglected or little loved, was preternaturally keen; and, after one look at the awful group, he hid his face in the dusty curtain he had torn down to put over the baby, and waited without a sound for the tempest.

But none came, for nobody was thinking about him. Sir Charles bent down over him without taking any notice of him, and looked at the sleeping child. Then he took one of the candles from Mrs. Symes, and looked again.

"By Jove!" said he at last. The child's beauty had impressed him just as strongly as it had the farmer.

"She's a picture—isn't she, sir?" said Mrs. Symes.

"Here, Elizabeth, Eleanor—come and look! I never saw such a—by Jove!" he repeated, unable to find adequate words.

His younger sister stepped forward, and was forced, without much enthusiasm however, to admit that the child was pretty. Mr. Corbyn's gruff voice broke in.

"Yes; if she's as fair in her ways as she is in her looks, we sha'n't have no cause to regret we took her in—shall we, sir?"

"Took her in! Why, it was my nephew here who took her in! You found her first, didn't you, James?"

"Yes, uncle; I found her in the shed, and I was with her all the time. Oh, do let me keep her, Uncle Charles!"

"What do you say to that, Mr. Corbyn?"

"I say, sir, that those ought to have her that's best able to provide for her; and if Master James is better able than me to take

the responsibility of a young woman's bringing up, why, then let him have her by all means!" said the farmer, doggedly.

"Well, what if I take the responsibility for him?"

"Charles, are you dreaming?" cried Miss Elizabeth, so sharply that the child woke up, and, frightened by the crowd of strange faces, began to cry lustily.

Mrs. Corbyn rushed forward; but the two men, both grown eager and rather angry, stood in the way, still leaning over the child and looking at it and at each other.

"You said you'd send her to the workhouse, Mr. Corbyn!" cried James's shrill, childish voice. He had taken courage from his uncle's so unexpectedly taking up his cause.

"Look here, Corbyn; I've taken a fancy to the child too," said Sir Charles, with some excitement. "Let her decide for herself. Whichever of us she turns to of her own accord shall keep her."

"Charles!" broke in his sister again; but he paid no attention to her.

"Well, I'm only a rough man, and she'd go

to you if it was only for yer watch-chain, Sir Charles. Let my wife try against ye."

"No, no; of course she would go to the woman."

"Well, let Miss Eliz——" began the farmer, with a twinkle in his eye.

But, disgusted by her brother's freak and by his want of courtesy to herself, that lady had swept out of the room.

"Well, she shall decide between you and your wife, and me and my nephew."

"Of course she'll go to the gentlefolks, sir."

"Well, we'll see! I think you said you believed her father was a gentleman, while you know her mother was of much lower rank. Then this trial is perfectly fair, and will prove on which side her sympathies lie," said Sir Charles, who was by this time as much in earnest as the farmer.

The child had left off crying, and was sitting up and staring at them very solemnly, with one chubby hand to her mouth and the other buried in the old curtain, with which her small admirer had covered her to keep

her warm. Mrs. Corbyn knelt down on one side of her, putting her kind good-natured face coaxingly near to that of the baby-girl; her husband stood behind her and nodded and clucked in token of good-will. The little waif turned to them at once and chuckled and clapped her hands, without seeming to notice the baronet down on his knees on the other side of her, with his nephew standing by him, watching her breathlessly. Already a pair of motherly arms were closing round her, and the farmer was drawing himself up in triumph, when some impulse, some sound, some instinct —no one knew what—made the child turn, see the other two figures, and stretch out her baby-arms, not to her old friend James, but to Sir Charles. He was too much pleased to speak. Snatching her up in his arms, he rose, and was silent a moment, with the little creature against his breast, before he said very quietly to the farmer—

"I've won her quite fairly, Corbyn—have I not?"

"Well, I'm not saying you haven't, Sir Charles. But, look, sir—if it's you that's

going to charge yourself with her bringing up, you'll wan't somewhere to put her; and won't you put her with us? You see we've taken a fancy to her pretty face and her pretty little ways, and we'd be kind to her, you may be sure. Then, when she's old enough to enter your service, she can come to the Hall, sir, or we'll look after her still, just as you may please."

The baronet hesitated, looking down at the child, who was biting his waistcoat buttons and clawing him with sticky fingers.

"Well, Corbyn, we'll see about that to-morrow," said he, after a minute's consideration.

"I hope you'll decide to let us have her, sir," said the farmer's wife, with a winning, timid, pleading look into the baronet's face, as she followed her husband out.

Then Sir Charles walked out of the room and along the corridor and down the staircase with his burden, leaving the housekeeper to make a slow lunge at James, who eluded her and ran away to his own room. The dinner-hour drew near, and still Sir Charles did not

leave the library, where he had shut himself up with his prize. Just as the ladies were leaving the drawing-room to dress, their brother's voice, calling them hastily, sounded through the hall. They came to the library, the door of which was open. The baby was sitting in his armchair, with his watch and chain and seals for playthings; and Sir Charles, his face flushed with excitement, was standing over her with a dusty oil-painting in his hand.

"Look here, Elizabeth—isn't it marvellous? Look at that child and then at this!"

The picture was that of a smooth, smiling, elaborately dressed child, an aunt of theirs, painted when she was four, by Sir Thomas Lawrence. The likeness was undeniable; the silky fair hair, almost flaxen, the large velvety brown eyes, a quaint good humour in the expression—all were attributes of the portrait strikingly reproduced in the living child before them. Miss Elizabeth looked startled and uneasy, and glanced up in her brother's face to see if he shared the suspicion which had flashed through her own mind. The aunt whose picture Sir Charles held had married

badly and died, leaving a son who had been for years a disgrace to the family. A scamp of the worst kind, dishonest as well as dissolute, he had been shipped off again and again to this place and that by his relatives, and returned each time, smiling, affectionate, and unwelcome, to beg, borrow, and steal in every ingenious way that a well-born vagabond can. Nobody had heard of him for some years now, and his family were beginning to hope that they never would again. No deed was too bad, no desertion too heartless, for him to have committed; and as his cousin Elizabeth looked earnestly from the child to the picture, she faltered instinctively—

"Lindley Fielding!"

Sir Charles started and turned to her sharply.

"Nonsense, Elizabeth! He never was in Ireland."

"You can't be sure. We haven't heard of him for a long time now."

"Why, I should have been sure to have heard something of his doings when I was quartered at Sligo with my regiment, if he had been there! Lindley generally manages to

make his presence known within a hundred miles or so of wherever he may happen to be.'

"Well, send the child away somewhere; don't let the Corbyns take care of it. I could not rest while it was in the neighbourhood; it makes me quite uncomfortable to look at it, Charles."

"You will get used to the sight of it," said he, with unusual decision. "It is only a fancy of yours about Lindley, and I tell you I have a superstitious feeling about keeping the little creature. I believe—Heaven knows what I don't believe about it—perhaps it will bring luck back to the Otways. Yes, yes, I am as silly as a moonstruck nursemaid about this, I know. I'll do all in my power to find out its mother—the woman who left it—whoever she may be"—he paused, with his eyes fixed on the child—"and I'll have her brought up—as a lady."

"Not here," said his sister quietly, "unless you wish Eleanor and me to leave Waringham. You cannot expect your sisters to remain under the same roof with a creature picked up——"

"No, no, of course I did not mean here,"

he explained, falling into his usual tones of submission. "I must find some proper persons to take charge of her, and——"

"And what will people say, Charles?"

"I don't much care. I have made up my mind about this as firmly as—as if you had made it up for me, Elizabeth. I tell you the child became a sort of religion to me from the moment she put her chubby little arms round my neck."

"And have you any idea what this new religion will cost you? How will you afford to dress this religion and educate it and pay for its maintenance with 'proper persons' who will make proper charges for this sort of undertaking?"

"I don't know; I must find some way. Perhaps I'll sell Potheen; I hardly ever ride now."

"And what are you going to call her? She has no name; perhaps you propose giving her yours—ours!"

"No, no! I must think about that. I think she might do without one for a year or two, and that will give time to think it over.

Of course she must have a Christian name; that will be simpler."

Indeed, the child relieved him of that difficulty herself, for, before the discussion between him and his sister about her had lasted many more minutes, she began to rub her eyes restlessly and to cry pettishly, lisping out—

"Deldee go by-bye, Deldee go by-bye—Deldee tired!"

"That's it, that's her name!" said Sir Charles. triumphantly, as the dinner-bell rang. "Her name is Deldee. It is short for something; we can find out what to-morrow."

His sister, finding him obstinately bent on his purpose, as he always was on the rare occasions when he did make up his own mind, left the library without waiting to hear his careful directions to Johnson to take "the young lady" to Mrs. Symes, and to tell her to have a fire lighted in the old nursery, and to take care that the cot was well aired.

Perhaps it was lucky that Miss Elizabeth did not stay to hear these directions.

When, after dinner, the ladies left their brother, as usual, sitting in solitary state over

the wine which was not likely to tempt him to injudicious indulgence, he only waited until he heard the drawing-room door close upon them before he rose, left his usual fascinating after-dinner occupation of staring with vacant eyes over the shaded lamp and two pairs of flickering candles at the portraits of his ancestors and ancestresses high above him in the gloom on the walls, wondering what they did with their money to leave him so little—and, slipping very quietly, like a truant schoolboy, up the stairs, he paused at the nursery-door to listen to a sound which moved him strangely—the prattle of children. The door was ajar; he could look in without being seen. The fire, which was never lighted for Master James, was burning brightly enough to show the boy, in his night-shirt, sitting up in bed to talk to Deldee, whose cot was drawn, by his desire, close up to the side of his bed. He was apparently telling her a story, and she kept interrupting him with sleepy and entirely unintelligible comments. At last he stopped, and, leaning over the rail of the cot to examine her face, he said gravely—

"And I think I'll tell you the rest to-

morrow, Deldee, for I don't believe you're listening."

She made no answer; and the boy just put his hand out and gently patted the one chubby little fist which was lying on the counterpane, and then he lay down on his pillow and curled himself up for sleep. And Sir Charles went downstairs again and slipped quietly into the dining-room for a few moments before opening and shutting the door again loudly to proceed to the drawing-room.

But his guilty action had been witnessed by the butler, who had not found it difficult to keep out of sight in the ill-lighted hall, from which he had seen his master creeping noiselessly downstairs.

"It is the oddest thing I ever see," said he that evening, in the servants' hall, where this unheard-of event naturally excited plenty of comment and some whispering, in which Mr. Lindley Fielding's name was mentioned with a "Hush!" after it, "that Sir Charles, who seemingly can't abide children, by the way he treats Master James, his own brother's son and an orphan, should take such a fancy to this cast-off child of a tramp."

"But then the little thing is so pretty. It's as near what one thinks the angels are when children die young and go straight up to heaven as anything I ever see in a picture-book," said one of the housemaids sentimentally.

"Well, what I say is," said Johnson, doggedly, "it isn't fair on Master James."

"Master James is so rough when he's not shy; he isn't a taking sort of child," argued the cook.

"But he's got a good heart, for all that. Look how he's took to this little tear-your-eyes-out-if-you-don't-please-her, wild creature, that's being petted and made much of, while he, that's the heir and ought to be everybody, is just scolded and snubbed by everybody—even us. Why, it goes to my heart to see it—that it does! And all because he happens to be a bit shy and awkward, while this picked-up vagrant has the cheek of Old Harry! It's a shame, that's what it is—a shame!"

But if they had been able to see into the coming years and the events which these would bring to Waringham Hall, even Johnson would not have given all his pity to "Master James."

CHAPTER III.

Sir Charles's unusual burst of energy lasted long enough for him to carry his point with regard to the education of the child so strangely brought under his roof, but not long enough for him to pursue his inquiries into her antecedents very far. It did, indeed, suddenly occur to him, late in the evening of the day after that of her unexpected arrival, that he ought to try to find out her mother; but he put it off in his usual dilatory fashion for two or three days, so that when at last he caused an inquiry to be made in the neighbourhood as to the appearance and disappearance of the woman, it was too late for him to hope to track her without taking more energetic measures than he was ready to use. Deldee, who retained that form of name which some ingenious person guessed to have been

originally Geraldine, could give very little help in solving the mystery about herself. She cried at first from time to time for "mamma," but was consoled with ease which said little for her constancy. Indeed, she gave very few signs of possessing any of the qualities usually called good. She was impatient, exacting, wilful, greedy, and absolutely savage when thwarted. But she was so pretty, so bright, and had such fascinating, coaxing little ways, that it required strength of mind such as only Miss Elizabeth, of all the household at Waringham, possessed, to resist her. But for his sister, Sir Charles would have braved comment by keeping the child at the Hall. He was miserable at parting from her; and when she uttered a sharp scream and clung to his coat as he gave her a last fond hug before leaving her in the charge of the two excellent ladies who had undertaken the responsibility of her physical and mental wants, it needed all their remonstrances and their too true assurances that she would be consoled as soon as he was out of sight to prevent him from taking her home again with him.

The Misses Gretton, who had been recom-

mended by the Vicar of Waringham as the very persons for such a task as that of turning the wilful waif into a model young lady with all the latest improvements, were two middle-aged sisters who had formerly kept a fashionable ladies' school at a well-known seaside town on the south coast, but who had retired early owing to the ill-health of the younger, and settled in their birthplace, Copsley, a dull little town in Suffolk. They had made many objections at first to the unsatisfactory parentage of their proposed charge. But the sight of a back to be drilled and toes to be turned out was to the elder Miss Gretton as the sound of the bugle to the old war-horse, and before Deldee had been many minutes in their presence both sisters had yielded to the wonderful charm the little creature exercised on almost every one with whom she came in contact.

"Why, I believe it is a fairy!" exclaimed Miss Emma Gretton, the younger, at last.

And that speech, agreeing so well with Sir Charles's superstitious convictions concerning his pet, won his heart, and satisfied him that

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he had done right in trusting Deldee to the care of these gentle ladies, who, when their first reluctance was once overcome, promised faithfully to do their best with her.

They kept their word—to the unruly Deldee's cost. The vigilance which had kept twenty-five budding women in order at once being now all concentrated upon this solitary mite, she was drilled and instructed and improved with a watchful yet kindly strictness which subdued the impulsive manners and kept under the wild spirit, until, after some years passed in their care, no trace of the naughty baby was to be seen in the shy, reserved, and studious girl that, at twelve years old, she had become.

During all those nine years Sir Charles never failed—except on one occasion, when a slight seizure of some sort which frightened the household by a threat of paralysis, confined him to the house for several days—to walk or ride three or four times a week the seven miles which lay between Waringham, just within the borders of Norfolk, and Copsley, which was in Suffolk; though the prim and shy girl with

pigtail and schoolroom apron had lost, for the time at least, a good deal of the charm of the fascinating and forward baby.

During the very first week after Deldee's departure from Waringham, Master James made his appearance on the top of the high garden wall of the dull-looking old house in Copsley, just at the moment when the girl, fearless and mischievous as usual, having escaped into the narrow and now flowerless strip of ground, was amusing herself by trying to take away a bone from a big dog that was chained up there. Just as James, untidy, breathless, and covered with mud, slid down the wall and ran up her, Miss Gretton appeared at the back drawing-room window, and, not unnaturally mistaking him for some undesirable acquaintance Deldee had picked up before her rise in life, she hurried the poor boy through the house and out at the door without listening to his explanations. Tired and mortified, he got back to Waringham, partly on his weary feet, partly by the help of a friendly cart. On his way he came to a grand resolution; and next morning, when Sir Charles had mumbled through prayers in his

usual inaudible tones, his nephew made a nervous rush at him as he was leaving the room, and jerked out, in a choking voice—

"Uncle Charles, I found her—I brought her here! Oughtn't they to let me see her? Please make them."

His uncle had stopped and looked down at him. He was not fond of the boy; he had had a curious prejudice against him from the very day when, two years ago, he had taken the boy to Waringham on the death of his younger brother, Master James's father; but his sense of justice told him that there was reason in his nephew's words. Once a week thenceforward James was driven over to Copsley to eat cake and enjoy Deldee's society in the stiff drawing-room, in the stately presence of her two guardians, who thought him a very gentlemanly boy, but rather old-fashioned in his manners. But when the two ladies went to the seaside every year, Sir Charles took it into his head to ask them to take his nephew also; and those holiday-weeks which the children spent together were a golden time for both of them. Then all the malice and mischief which seemed

to have been uprooted by the Gretton *régime* sprang into new life, and Deldee tyrannized over him and thumped him and pinched him when he annoyed her, and made it up again with a violence almost equally aggressive, in a way which would have much shocked her guardians could they have guessed that the beautifully correct manners their pupil observed towards her companion when in their presence were instantly put off as soon as their confiding backs were turned. And James worshipped her dutifully; and when he went to Winchester —he being then thirteen and she eight—he told her that she was getting old enough to think seriously of things, and that she must look upon him as her future husband. Deldee was quite ready to do that—too ready, James thought—for he could not but feel that the promptness with which she nodded assent, over a piece of almond rock which she was eating, to all the grave propositions he was making to her, denoted a lightness of mind which spoke ill for her constancy.

"You are a giddy girl, Deldee!" said he, patronizingly. "You don't understand things

half as well as I did when I was your age. But then, of course, you're a girl; and that makes the difference. Well, I must speak to you about it when you are older."

But alas for human consistency! At Winchester the lonely boy found himself in a new world, among new occupations, new pleasures. His sturdy clumsy form grew straight, supple, and athletic in the playground, his facility in learning made his progress in the school brilliant, while his gentle, easily led disposition gave him dangerous popularity. When he returned to Waringham, at each successive vacation taller, handsomer, and with a better report of his college successes, he did indeed still submit fondly to Deldee's caprices and continue to remind her that she was to marry him when she grew up; but at each return there was a shade more sense of fun in his proposal and a shade more seriousness in her acceptance of it—until, when he, a big, bright, good-looking lad of seventeen, took leave of her in affectionate, but most lively fashion, on the occasion of her going to France to be "finished," she—a shy slim girl of twelve, with fair hair

still in pigtail and flashing eyes of velvety brown, that promised to do their share of mischief some day—grew silent and awkward, and tried to withdraw her cheek from the matter-of-course kiss which he, grown bold enough now, gave her in the very presence of the Misses Gretton.

"You are not to forget that you are engaged to me. Don't let me hear of your flirting with some fellow at a French *lycée*," he found an opportunity of whispering to her presently, as he pressed her red, bony girl's hand, and gave her a long sentimental look with his good-humoured, gentle blue eyes.

And he had not the least idea of the effect his tender, half-jesting, half-serious speech had upon the passionate, imaginative child-woman. She remained in France four years, having been provided, at the suggestion of Miss Gretton, with a surname. After having considered the matter carefully for some days, Sir Charles—without mentioning the fact to his sisters—had given her one of the family names, and sent her to school at St. Denis as Miss Geraldine Lindley. She expressed some sur-

prise on learning that Gretton, which she had used as her own, was not her name ; but, having been told long ago that she was the orphan daughter of two dear friends of Sir Charles, this fact awoke no suspicion in her mind. She did not come to England for any holidays—this had been insisted upon by Sir Charles's sister Elizabeth, who grew fiercer every year in her resentment against the girl who had taken up so much of her brother's love, and, far worse, of his money. This he agreed to the more readily, as it put off the approaching day when the girl he loved as his own child must make the terrible discovery of her own position. He had not reckoned for this difficulty when an irresistible impulse of tenderness and admiration had made him adopt the beautiful little waif and treat her so generously ; when it first occurred to him, it was characteristic of him that he set about evading it. In spite of the wise objections of the Misses Gretton, he insisted that she was to be kept in entire ignorance of the truth, that she was not to know that he himself lived near, and that his sisters were never to be mentioned to her. She was to

be made to believe that he came from a distance to see her. James was bound to be equally silent; and as, besides being by nature honourable, he knew Deldee was not to be trusted with a secret, he was discreet; and, though she knew his home was with Sir Charles, she did not know where that home was, for she had no recollection of Waringham Hall. To all the remonstrances of the Misses Gretton, Sir Charles replied that he would break it to her some day—that he had a plan. But they shrewdly guessed that that plan was to leave the story untold as long as possible, and then to shift the telling of it on to some one else's shoulders.

And as, during those four inquiring, self-tormenting, transition years of a girl's life from twelve to sixteen, she was surrounded by people who could tell her nothing about her parentage and her prospects, she lived in happy ignorance of her own history; while a certain natural reserve and distinction of manner, which increased the effect of her beauty and accomplishments, gave rise to a belief among her companions that she was "an

heiress"—a belief which in time naturally affected her also, and seemed the reasonable explanation of the semi-conventual care which had guarded her childhood. At last, as Miss Gretton took no notice of the suggestions in her old pupil's letters that she would like to know something more than had been told her about her parents and position, the girl wrote more boldly, begging Miss Gretton to let her know whether certain small extravagances in dress in which she had indulged were justified by her prospects. The old lady showed this letter gravely to Sir Charles, who said he would reply to it. But he had not the heart to rebuke her, to warn her; he merely wrote to say that, in answer to her very natural questions, it was time for her to know that her father had been a brother-officer of his own who had not been very well off, but had been able to leave her properly provided for; he himself was her trustee and guardian, and there was no need for her to stint herself in any of a young lady's little wants and whims.

So that, while Sir Charles and his sisters lived with strict economy which bordered upon

niggardliness at Waringham, the little vagrant picked up in a shed held among her companions the envied position of a rich girl with whom money was no object. Happily this elevation was not attained at great cost, for the school at St. Denis, though good, was not a fashionable one. To meet the expense of Deldee's education, Sir Charles, unknown to his sisters, to whom he understated the cost of it, had sold one of his farms and cut down some timber on a remote part of the estate; but, during the thirteen years between the child's adoption and her return from France, no day passed without some cutting allusion from Elizabeth Otway to her brother's criminal philanthropy, which would keep a vagrant in comfort while his sisters almost starved. If they starved, however, he starved too; and he might have pointed out to her that they might all have lived more comfortably, if she would only have consented to reduce their retinue of idle servants and the number of horses in the stable to their modest needs. But there were traditions to be kept up in the face of poverty, of discomfort, of disunion. And so, though the days of Waring-

ham hospitality were gone by, there were two discontented servants to do the work of every one, and the coach-house was stored with big barouche, and with dog-cart, waggonette, and phaeton rotting in the damp and darkness, now that there were no guests to drive to meet or to battue, when one small brougham would have amply fulfilled all the requirements of the family.

When Deldee had been away two years and James was nineteen, he began to give his uncle some uneasiness by growing rather "wild," and at last announced his disinclination to enter the Church, for which, that being the only profession in which Sir Charles had strong interest, he was intended. Argument, persuasion, warning followed, and at length the young man consented to be placed with a private tutor in order to prepare himself for the only profession in which, as his uncle assured him, he had any chance of rapid advancement.

But two years later, just before Deldee's expected return, and just before he had completed his twenty-first year, a fresh fit of mad impatience against his intended career seized

him; he expressed a restless wish to travel, to see something more of life and the world than the rigid economy want of money had forced upon him allowed him to do. And Sir Charles, to keep him quiet, resolved to entrust him with a long-delayed task which he had set himself—to go to Ireland and entrust a solicitor he had formerly known, now living in Dublin, with the task of trying to trace out the parentage of Deldee. Certain vague suspicions, which had strengthened as the years went by, that the child had not been left by accident in the neighbourhood of Waringham Hall, had increased his wish to solve the mystery which hung about her; and the letter which James carried to Mr. Massey, a man in whom Sir Charles had reason to place the utmost confidence, contained the most explicit instructions and the clearest indications as to the nature of his suspicions.

James took leave of his uncle and of his aunts, and started on his mission in the beginning of June. As he stood in the hall, ready for his journey, with the excitement of a wish about to be realized lighting up his face, tall,

stalwart, handsome, Sir Charles was forced to feel, for almost the first time, a glow of pride in his heir. With cold Elizabeth, who worshipped success, James had long since become a somewhat unresponsive darling; the sensitive nature could not forget the early snubs inflicted by the hard one.

"When Deldee comes back, I shall have a handsome pair of young people about me," said Sir Charles to his nephew, in a voice too low for the ladies to hear.

"Deldee! Oh yes, she is coming back this summer, isn't she? Tell her from me that——"

"Why, you can give your messages yourself. You are only going to be away a month, and she does not return till late in August."

"Oh, ah, yes, I had forgotten!" said the young man, with a moment's constraint. And he turned to his aunts, and lightly told them to expect him with a brogue and a shillelagh.

But something in his tone had struck Sir Charles; and, when the young fellow had given both his aunts an unusually affectionate kiss and pressed his uncle's hand stedfastly without

looking him in the face, and had driven off with unaccountable moisture in his blue eyes, the baronet started forward with an alarmed expression of face, and called him back. But James did not or would not hear. And Sir Charles stepped absently back into the hall just as his younger sister was saying—

"There is the stamp of success about that boy. I believe he will bring the old days back to Waringham."

But Eleanor said, in her thin querulous voice—

"I hope he may, I m sure, Elizabeth. But he has poor dear James's weak mouth, and, for a young man destined for the Church, his views are by no means serious."

"So much the better; he will look beyond his flock. James will be a bishop, and for that, you know, he must be a man of this world as well as a pilot to the next."

Eleanor was too submissive to her sister even to look shocked by this speech; but it hurt her, as the hard and sometimes flippant remarks of her clever sister often did. Sir Charles listened to them both, but went into

the library without any comment on their words.

They received letters from James, telling of his safe arrival in Dublin, and of his fulfilment of his mission so far at least as the delivery of the letter to the lawyer was concerned. He knew what the subject of that letter was, and had been instructed by his uncle to supplement it by replying to such questions concerning Deldee and her first appearance at Waringham as Mr. Massey might think fit to put to him. But of this part of his task he said nothing, nor did the solicitor when he acknowledged the receipt of the letter and promised Sir Charles to do his utmost in the matter.

Then there was a pause. James was a bad correspondent, and they were not much surprised at not hearing from him ; but, as Ireland was in rather a more disturbed state than usual, they began, after three weeks' silence, to be rather uneasy about him.

"I dare say we shall not hear a word until he suddenly turns up brimming over with adventures, and mad either for or against Irish patriots," said Elizabeth.

"Do you think it was quite wise to let him go to a place like Ireland at such a time as this, considering how rash and headstrong young men are, and how they will rush into danger for the sake of excitement?" asked Eleanor, nervously. "Supposing he should get into mischief?"

Sir Charles fidgeted and pulled his moustache.

"If young men want to get into mischief, they can make it for themselves anywhere; and, if a lad of twenty-one can't take care of himself, I hardly think he is worth taking care of," said the baronet. "He's all right, depend upon it. Ireland isn't so bad as it's painted; I've lived there, and I know."

Still, there was a trace of anxiety in his eyes, as well as in those of his sisters; and, when the month allowed for James's holiday was over and still no news came of him, they could no longer hide from each other their alarm. He was to have spent his time travelling about the country, staying at Killarney, and visiting some friends of the family who had a seat in County Down. Without saying any-

thing about it to his sisters, Sir Charles wrote to these friends and received the reply that they had heard nothing of the young man, whom they had expected, but who had never appeared. Mr. Massey, too, had heard nothing about him since his delivery of the letter from Sir Charles.

The suspense at Waringham was at its height when, ten weeks after James Otway's departure, Geraldine Lindley returned, by Sir Charles's arrangement, back to her old guardians, the Misses Gretton, who received her with joy and affection. Increasing years had taken the edge off the duenna-like asperity of the elder, and the beautiful bright-faced young girl was welcomed by both sisters as a ray of sunshine to cheer their old age. As for Sir Charles, who had kept the date of her return a secret from his own sisters, and had found that business required him to be in town at the time, his pride and delight on finding how brilliantly she had fulfilled the promise of her pretty babyhood knew no bounds. But, at the first moment of his meeting her at Victoria Station, he was struck by an indefinable like-

ness to the fairest among the ladies of his own family, which was even more noticeable in the graceful accomplished girl of sixteen than it had been in the merry, active little waif of three. He took her back to Copsley, dreading all the way that she would ask some question about James, the answer to which, revealing the anxiety her old playfellow's long absence was causing to his friends, must necessarily pain her. But she did not ask a single direct question about him, though she mentioned his name several times, and each time Sir Charles let the subject drop.

It was through Miss Emma Gretton that she first heard the bad news, which she received with such unmoved tranquillity of manner that the elder lady was rather pained to see her show so little feeling.

"Don't you understand, my dear? We have every reason—his uncle has every reason to believe that something very serious, perhaps something fatal, may have happened to the poor young gentleman."

"I hope not, I'm sure, Miss Emma. But it is no one's fault but his own if he has got

into some difficulty. You say it was his own wish to go," said Geraldine, quietly.

And Miss Emma told her sister, when they were alone together, that, in turning out so clever, their old pupil was growing rather hard.

She was clever, there was no doubt of that. Her playing of harp and piano was showy and brilliant; her drawing and painting remarkable for clear, careful resemblance to the copy; her French, German, and Italian correct and fluent. And the wish for further improvement, which was not likely to die in the society of the ex-schoolmistress, made her devote herself still to study. To the old ladies she seemed a paragon.

"How fortunate, my dear!" said the elder to her sister. "She will make an admirable governess. I shall not hint that to Sir Charles; but we must do our best, very gradually of course, to prepare Geraldine's mind for the thought of a career of tuition. Then, indeed, Sir Charles's generosity will not have been thrown away. She will be able to enter a nobleman's family, Emma; and, later, with the help of Sir Charles's influence, she might

become principal of a ladies' college. Her propects in the direction of instruction are positively boundless."

"I hope she may be worthy of them, Rebecca. She certainly shows most praiseworthy industry. But you know she has hardly yet arrived at the crucial test of the period when young girls are apt to let frivolous and regrettable ideas of gaiety and admiration turn their attention from steady effort to the vain things of this world."

"If you mean to a husband, Emma, I am sure I hope she may find one. For I know, if I had been handsome enough to attract a worthy man, I would have jumped at him," candidly confessed the elder, whose long withered face and keen black eyes would now and then sparkle with a flash of humour and shrewd common-sense through the crust of prim rigidity formed by nearly half a century of strict scholastic discipline.

For nearly a year Geraldine lived quietly on, as uneventfully as if she had been a cloistered nun, with nothing but Sir Charles's visits to break the monotony of the long days

of diligent study varied only by the slow measured constitutionals of a mile or two a day, which were all that the elder Miss Gretton, active as she was by nature, now cared to take, and by the girl's visits to the neighbouring cottagers. In none of these expeditions did she ever get as far as Waringham; and she never guessed how near it was to Copsley.

No news came to Sir Charles, either of his nephew's fate or of any result of the search for Geraldine's parents, until the autumn of the year in which the young girl reached the age of seventeen. Then Sir Charles received a letter from Mr. Massey which, coupled with reports in the newspapers, came upon the whole household like a thunderbolt.

James Otway was one of six men arrested on a charge of murder. The victim was a farmer named Hughes, and the motive of the outrage was said to be revenge for the resentment Hughes had shown at an insult offered by James Otway to his daughter. Sir Charles and his sisters at once decided that there was some mistake, that the James Otway

who had been apprehended could not be their nephew, and the baronet wrote back to the lawyer to that effect.

Mr. Massey replied that he was sorry to say there was no possibility of doubt upon the subject.

"Mr. Lindley Fielding," he wrote, "your unworthy cousin, about whom you have so often had to consult me, called at my office the other day, frankly owning that the sight of another member of his family in difficulties was, next to his kindness of heart, the attraction which had taken him to see his nephew. He said that he had found Mr. James Otway much depressed and ashamed of himself, and that he wished his family to forget his existence, should the law, on account of some doubt as to who struck the finishing blow at Hughes, allow him to live. In addition to this evidence, I, having reason to mistrust Mr. Fielding as a witness in any matter, myself visited the prisoner James Otway, who was in truth, as his relative had for once correctly reported, deeply cast down and unable to look me in the face. I have done what I could for him, and I can

undertake to say that he will be most ably defended. But I fear I must add that the most you can hope for is that the capital sentence may be commuted in this case to penal servitude. I will not press you to come and see him, knowing your reluctance to do so. You may rely upon his having the benefit of every exertion in my power. Mr. Fielding made many inquiries, which I answered with caution, about Miss Geraldine Lindley, of whom he must have have heard through Mr. James Otway, your nephew. I don't know what idea he has in his restless, mischief-spinning brain about this young lady; but I would advise you to be on the look-out."

A few weeks later, the six prisoners were tried at the Munster Assizes, and the sentence passed upon James Otway was—"Penal servitude for life."

CHAPTER IV.

FIVE years have passed uneventfully over the stagnant household at Waringham Hall since the day when Sir Charles Otway and his sisters learnt the terrible news that their nephew James had been sentenced, on a charge of participation in a murder, to penal servitude for life. He is dead to them now; his name is never mentioned; his room, which had been, by order of his Aunt Elizabeth, kept constantly ready for his return up to the very day of his apprehension, was locked up, just as it was, by her own hand, and has never since been opened. It is a sepulchre of dead memories, many of which the cold proud woman would fain forget —for conscience tells her of a boyhood dreary and joyless through unsympathetic treatment; and in the night-time she sometimes fancies she again hears the patter of little feet, as she used

often to do while in her room dressing for dinner, when James, sent to bed early and supperless for some trifling childish fault quite undeserving of such a harsh punishment, shuffled sobbing along the corridor, sometimes stopping outside her door for a moment to give an ostentatiously loud moan of grief, in the vain hope of softening her.

The Hall became gloomier than ever, Elizabeth more imperious, Eleanor more querulous, Sir Charles, now close upon sixty, more silent. The very servants — the youngest middle-aged by this time—had grown into a mournful gravity which harmonized with the threadbare carpets and the mouldy hangings, and with the fallen fortunes of the family.

One consolation Sir Charles had which his sisters did not share. Three times a week he rode over to Copsley to see his adopted daughter, who, at twenty-two, was still with her old instructress—the younger being dead—living something like the life of a nun. Most of the people about the neighbourhood had learnt her story, though she herself still remained in ignorance of it; and she had a circle

of acquaintances, consisting of those few lawyers and doctors and clergymen about Copsley whom Miss Gretton honoured with her intimacy, and of a chirping colony of old maids. Among these latter she would long ago have learnt the manner of her coming to Waringham but for a very natural suspicion to which her likeness to the Otway family, Sir Charles's fondness, and his sisters' well-known virulent dislike had long ago given rise.

The girl herself had borne her isolated life outwardly well; but the fierce cravings of a young woman for excitement, for admiration, for sympathy, for love, were intensified by her position to such a degree of fever-heat in her passionate, emotional nature, that, had it not been for one resource, she must have broken the bounds of her dull prison life. This resource was the common one of solitary women, the spoiling of ream after ream of good paper with bad verses, long-winded stories, trite essays, of no value to any one but the owner; but they saved her from madness of one sort or another, and that of course was something.

She was much admired by the golden youth

of the county ; but her anomalous position had kept away any admirers whom her protectresses would have considered worthy of encouragement, until lately, when the only son of the old Vicar of Waringham, Reginald Bamber, a handsome man of about thirty, just returned from America, on the look-out for a wife, had been so much struck by the girl's beauty and graceful modesty of manner that he entreated his father to ask Sir Charles the truth about the girl. He was a man of too calm and prudent a nature to offer himself to her in spite of everything ; but he was deeply enough in love with her not to be able to resist the temptation of throwing himself a good deal in her way. She was more of a coquette than the disdainful indifference with which she had treated the admiration of the county gentlemen around would have led her friends to believe ; and the attention of the dignified, handsome, sweet-voiced Reginald Bamber, whom all the girls she knew were raving about, gave a pleasant variety to her dull life which led her to give him tacit encouragement and to make him feel more sure of her liking than he had any reason to be.

When Mr. Bamber approached the subject of Geraldine's history as delicately as he could, and asked Sir Charles if he thought it fair to the girl to let her remain in a neighbourhood where the suspicions cast upon her birth might possibly injure her prospects, the baronet felt that the Vicar's words contained a truth to which he had long tried to blind himself.

"You are right, Bamber," said he, after a long pause, during which he had sat like a culprit, with bent head, accusing and excusing himself. "It is not fair to the girl. And I will set it right—yes, I will set it right. She shall come here, whatever my sisters may say; and, once at Waringham Hall, no one will dare to say a word against her. Heaven knows her presence will let a flood of light into the old vault, and frighten away some of the black shadows that have crept into the corners of late years."

The Vicar was amazed. He thought it not at all unlikely that the baronet would carry his point with that dogged obstinacy he could show when he was at last forced by circumstances to make up his mind upon any point; but whether

the "flood of sunshine" would long continue to shed any light in the grim presence of those two withered sisters who hated her already, and whose hate would not be likely to diminish when brought into personal contact with its object, was another matter. After looking in some perplexity at his old friend and neighbour for some minutes after this announcement, the Vicar rose to his feet and got out of his difficulty in a characteristic manner.

"Well, think it over, think it over," he said, as he shook hands with the baronet and left him to his reflections.

These were not wholly cheerful ones. The explanation he had so long dreaded, so long shuffled out of, could be put off no longer. Geraldine must learn that she had lived on lies; that there was a mystery about her birth; that she was penniless; that he had two sisters who disliked her. He counted upon their aversion melting like snow before the sun under the influence of her sweetness and charm; but still it would not do for her to come into their presence in ignorance of any circumstance in her own history, to risk its being told to her

less kindly than by his own lips. She had been as a daughter to him, he as a father to her, for eighteen years now; he would adopt her frankly now, and the fact of his sisters' receiving her under the same roof with them—for they should receive her, he had resolved upon that—would silence the tattle of the neighbourhood, and make people receive the meagre account which was all he had to give them as indeed the truth. Yes, on the very next day he would ride over as usual to Copsley; but, instead of sitting as usual, almost monosyllabically listening to the prattle which was always cheerful for him, he would take her out for a walk with him, and make that strange and difficult confession as best he might.

But his decision had been made too late, and his confession was to be forestalled.

On the morning after Sir Charles's conversation with the Vicar, Geraldine was walking through a lane a little way from Copsley, with a basket in her hand containing some jelly and broth for a sick woman. She was alone, for Miss Gretton did not feel well enough to accompany her. Rather glad to be able to

choose her own pace, she was tripping along as fast as her feet could carry her, the April air quickening her young blood, brightening her soft brown eyes, and bringing a glow of rich colour to her cheeks, when, turning quickly into a grass-covered cartway which led to the row of cottages which was the end of her journey, she came face to face with two gentlemen; one was the curate, the other a stranger whom she had several times lately met in his company. She had heard a good deal of gossip lately as to who this strange gentleman could be, who had for the last few days come over so frequently from Colchester, where it was understood that he was staying, apparently for no other motive than to enjoy the society of the curate, Mr. Meadows, whose acquaintance he had made last Sunday after service, and who, though a good little fellow enough and quite a favourite everywhere but in the pulpit, was not the sort of companion people would have expected such a well-dressed and well-bred-looking man as the stranger to find very interesting.

Geraldine had taken a dislike to the man

ever since the first moment when she had met his critical stare of approval in church ; and she felt very much annoyed when the curate, after a few low words from his companion, said, in the hurried nervous manner peculiar to him when not preaching—in the pulpit vigorous denunciation was his forte—

"Miss Lindley, will you allow me to introduce to you my friend Mr. Howard ?"

She bowed rather coldly, and exchanged a few remarks with her new acquaintance in a hard, smileless, almost repellant manner which she could assume when she was not pleased. She thought Mr. Meadows had taken a liberty in forcing upon her this introduction to a man who, although his manner was that of a certain class of gentlemen, was, some instinct told her, an undesirable acquaintance. Mr. Howard was not of the type of men who are easily snubbed, and he took care not to let her pass on until, by an adroit remark, he had at last drawn an unwilling smile from her. She then continued her walk, fulfilled her errand, paid two or three visits to cottages near, and returned towards Copsley. On the way back she gathered a

basketful of primroses, and, turning into the churchyard, she sat down on one of the tombstones and began to put them together and fasten them up, to place on the grave of a little girl who had been one of her scholars in the Sunday school, and who had been carried off by consumption just before the spring flowers began to blossom.

She was occupied with her flowers with the utter absorption natural to her in any work, however trifling, when the voice of the unwelcome Mr. Howard addressed her. He had approached from behind her, across the grass and the graves, so softly that she had not heard a sound until he spoke.

"Another errand of mercy or kindness, I can guess, Miss Lindley," said he, with a smile and a pleasant manner which were difficult to resist. And Mr. Howard strolled round the last tombstone which separated him from her, and, resting his hand upon the cross-beam of a cold white marble cross, he looked down upon her with a kindliness which forced her to look up. And then she was forced, against her will, to smile back again.

Mr. Howard was not a very young man. He was rather short, rather stout, and looked a year or two less than forty. In truth, he was older; but he was so carefully dressed, so genial of manner, the grey hairs in his dark moustache and hair were so well dyed, that he carried his years very lightly.

Geraldine shook her head slowly and rather sorrowfully, as she answered him—

"No one can show either kindness or mercy to the dead. These flowers are to put on a grave."

"Now, why do you do it? I have had impressed upon me most strongly, by every one I have met about here, that you are a young lady of transcendent learning and accomplishments, not at all likely to do anything without a reason, and a good one."

"That silly Mr. Meadows has been telling you that. He thinks me learned because I know where all his hackneyed quotations come from. But even if I were learned I dare say I should have human weaknesses. I suppose putting flowers on a grave is silly, yet I should

not like to think there would be no one silly enough to put them on mine."

"Not silly at all. Don't let us talk about graves," said Mr. Howard, with uncomfortable hastiness. "Why choose the saddest of all subjects on such a lovely morning as this?"

"Oh, but I think there are many things sadder than death!" said Geraldine, for whom, in the bloom of her two and twenty years, the tomb had a fascination which a quarter of a century's nearer approach to it had very much decreased in her companion. "Separation—life-long separation from—from people we care about." And her voice suddenly quivered. "To see good people unhappy and not to be able to comfort them; to have friends a long way off in trouble and suffering, and not to be able to go to them. Why, to die seems easy compared with a lot of troubles I know. But, then, I believe people who live very solitary lives seldom fear death," she added, in a moralizing tone that frequent solitude had caused her to acquire when speaking on subjects about which she had thought much.

"But surely you don't lead a solitary life,

young as you are! You are not quite in the wilderness here, though I dare say the society of the neighbourhood is not very enlivening. There are so few young people of your own age in the families about."

Geraldine was rather surprised; every one looked upon this gentleman as a stranger.

"I always find out something about the inhabitants of any place I may be in, as well as about the scenery," he added in explanation; "and I make a point of seeing all the old houses and churches. Old buildings are eloquent to me."

"Well, the inhabitants of Copsley are as old as their houses, I think, and have about as much to say for themselves."

"You are severe. But I don't confine myself to Copsley. I go farther afield, and visit Heckleton and Tolbeach and Waringham."

"The church at Tolbeach is pretty, but there is not much to see at Heckleton. And Waringham—why, Waringham is a long way off; it is not in Suffolk at all!"

"No, it is just within the borders of

Norfolk, I know," said the stranger, watching her. "But it is only seven miles off, nearer than Tolbeach."

"Only seven miles off! Indeed, I—I think yon must be mistaken. I have lived here all my life, and I—oh, indeed I am sure it is a great deal farther off than that!"

"No; I assure you you have miscalculated the distance. You know where the road branches off, just at the foot of the hill which goes up to Waringham park-gates?"

"I have never been to Waringham?"

"Never been to Waringham!" he echoed, in a tone the surprise of which it suddenly occurred to Geraldine to think was feigned. "Then that accounts for your thinking it so much further off than it is. You ought to know Sir Charles Otway and his two weird old sisters." Geraldine started; but her companion did not seem to notice this. He continued—"Sir Charles himself is a charming gentleman—he is an old friend of mine—indeed a connection of my family; but his sisters are the very reverse of him in all things—at least the younger is, and the elder follows her sister's

lead. But you really ought to know Sir Charles."

"I do know Sir Charles," answered the girl, quietly, but in a constrained voice. "He is my guardian."

"Indeed! To tell the truth, I had heard so; but your saying that you had never been to Waringham made me doubt whether I had heard correctly."

"Quite correctly. He was a comrade of my father's, who left me in his care. He is as fond of me as if I were his own child."

"Yet you have never been to Waringham?" He let the question slip out so naturally that it did not seem impertinent.

"No-o, I have never been to Waringham," Geraldine answered, in a low voice.

Suddenly Mr. Howard's manner changed; and, bending a little lower, so that he could look into her face, he said impressively—

"And do you know why?"

The girl raised her head quickly and coldly—

"If he had wished me to know, Sir Charles would have told me."

"And do you not wish to know? Of course you do. Some curiosity in the matter, now that I have unwittingly let out two things that you did not know before, is only natural."

The girl rose, and clung to the headstone of the grave next to the flat stone one on which she had been sitting.

"Whatever curiosity I may have to know whether the things you have told me are true or false I must stifle. I—I have no right to—to pry into any secret which my guardian chooses to keep from me."

She was trembling and cold; the pretty colour had left her cheeks, and her eyes seemed suddenly to have lost their lustre.

Mr. Howard was overwhelmed on seeing the effect of his rash disclosures. He made profuse apologies, and added, as he withdrew his hand from the cross on which it had been resting and prepared to take leave—

"You must allow me, Miss Lindley, as a man nearly old enough to be your father"—he was quite old enough, but "nearly" sounded better—"to express my admiration of your self-control, wonderful in one so young, in

resisting the temptation to learn a secret—which, whatever you may say, must be—is of vital interest to you."

He raised his hat, and was leaving her, when, turning suddenly towards him, with trembling lips and shaking voice she called him back.

"Mr. Howard, one moment, please. There is one question I must ask—I may ask; there can be no harm in that. Perhaps——" She stopped, hesitating. In spite of herself, the poor girl was unable entirely to resist the temptation to learn something more, if only a little; and she was trying to think of an innocent question.

Mr. Howard came to the rescue.

"Do not torture yourself needlessly," said he, kindly. "There is nothing much more terrible in what you have not heard than in what you have heard. The answer to one of the questions which puzzle you I have already given you; it is Sir Charles's sisters, or rather his sister Elizabeth, who is the obstacle to your going to Waringham. Whatever her brother hates she loves; whatever—

whoever he loves, she hates. As Sir Charles —your guardian I think you called him?—is fond of you, I will answer for it that, in Elizabeth Otway's eyes, poison would not be bad enough for you."

"Is that so?" asked the girl, her face suddenly clearing. "Then, of course, Sir Charles could not take me to see Waringham, because his sisters would not have received me kindly; and so, in order to avoid telling me that, for fear it might pain me, he never mentioned them to me, and let me think Waringham was a long way off. That is just like him—so kind and considerate! That explains everything. Oh, I am so glad!" she cried, as the natural colour began to flow back to her cheeks, and she gave a deep sigh of relief. "I—I began to be quite frightened. It came so suddenly, and I have always lived so quietly that anything that sounds at all strange impresses me deeply. I—I don't know what I thought at first."

"Nothing half so strange as the truth, Miss Lindley, I am sure of that. What would you say to a person who would clear up the mys-

teries concerning you and the people about you, which must long have puzzled you?"

"What mysteries? I know of no mysteries. I don't understand you," said the girl, sharply, her face flushing red under this new and more alarming form of attack.

"Has it never occurred to you to ask yourself—if not, to ask those around you—why you lead a life so different from that of other girls?—why you have been brought up as those girls are who are intended to shine in society, and yet are kept shut up here with two old schoolmistresses like a nun, with no companions of your own age, none of the usual amusements and gaieties of a young lady? Do you never wonder why you are never shown any portraits of your parents, why you are never told anything about them except vaguely in answer to questions from yourself?"

"What do you mean?" gasped Geraldine, in a very low voice, looking at him steadily, but clinging to the worn stone by which she was standing, as if she scarcely felt that she had strength to bear the shock of what might be coming.

"What would you say to—some one who, having heard your story and been struck with deep pity for your position and deep admiration for the way in which you filled it, had taken the trouble to hunt out evidence which would remove you from it, would expose the cruelty which has let your bright young life lie under a shadow for so long, and force those who are keeping you out of your rightful place to yield it up to you?"

"I don't understand you."

"If this were true that I am telling you, you would be grateful to such a person, would you not? I am sure you would, for you are very tender-hearted. And if this person were to prove to be a—a relative of your own, who had been as ill-treated at the hands of the rest of his family as you had been yourself by the same persons, you would in gratitude stretch out a kindly hand to him, show him sympathy in his trials, give him help in his struggles with unmerited misfortune."

"All this bewilders me. I don't know what you mean. I begin to feel that I ought never to have listened."

"Ah, that is what people always begin to feel when you mention to them that you expect a little help in return for a great service!" interrupted Mr. Howard, the passionate tones to which he had worked himself up during his last speech changing a little. "But that is not like you, Miss Lindley. You are generous-hearted. You——"

"Wait, wait. Let me think. You are a stranger to me, and you come upon me with—with a long account of some mystery which you make more mysterious by your way of telling it. Before I hear another word from you I must see my guardian, must tell him what you have told me—or part of it, at least—there is no help for it now—and must ask him if I am to believe—what I am to believe."

"Ask Sir Charles! You will get no help there. He will stammer and excuse himself, tell you I am not to be believed, that what I have told you is a tissue of nonsense."

"If my guardian tells me that, that is the version I shall have to accept, Mr. Howard."

"You will try to do so, perhaps. But some day human nature will get the better of you so

far as to lead you to ask, not Sir Charles, but some indifferent person how far off Waringham is; and when you hear that it is just seven miles from here, some other day you will not be able to resist the temptation to walk those seven miles; and when you find out that, besides Sir Charles, the two old ladies, his sisters, live in it, you will begin to wonder if there was not some truth in those other suggestions the stranger gave you, and to be tormented with a burning wish to know what that last and most important piece of information was which you were too proud or too timid to let him tell."

"You are mistaken. Whatever my guardian tells me will satisfy me."

"I think not. But it is possible something I have to tell him may satisfy him. For, though you have not treated the disinterested services of a complete stranger very kindly, I am magnanimous enough to resolve to serve you against your will. Then, when you have experienced my generosity in spite of yourself, it will lie with you whether you show me a corresponding generosity in return, or—like most of your sex—forget it. I will give you my

address. When—I do not say 'if' but 'when' —you want my help to clear up the mass of difficulties and contradictions you will encounter when you put your questions to Sir Charles, a note, a telegram will summon me to your service immediately."

He put into her hand a card, which she allowed to drop unread to the ground. He was not daunted by this show of disdain, knowing well that she would pick it up and read it as soon as he was out of sight, and that, if she were to tear it in pieces and throw it to the winds the next moment, the address would remain indelibly graven on her mind.

She let him go with the coldest of bows in answer to his elaborately courteous salute, and in her nervous excitement uttered a short scream as Reginald Bamber's sweet voice, graver and rather faster than usual, addressed her.

"Miss Lindley, what has that man been saying to you? He has frightened you."

"Oh no, not at all! He is a stranger here —a friend of Mr. Meadows. He only——"

She gave way and burst into a passion of tears. Turning blindly to escape, she ran

against a gravestone, and Reginald laid a gentle, restraining hand on her arm the next moment.

"Have you hurt yourself?" he asked very softly.

"No, oh no! Let me go, please. Miss Gretton is waiting for me. I——"

"You must let me ask you one question, Miss Lindley. You know very well it is not impertinent curiosity which prompts me. I know the man who was speaking to you just now—at least, I knew him once. I know him as a worthless insinuating scamp, who will make any mischief in order to make a little profit out of it. He would tell any lie, tease anybody, to any extent——"

"What, what? Are you sure?" interrupted Geraldine, eagerly seizing his hand in her breathless anxiety, as she looked up with glistening intent eyes into his face. "He does not tell the truth, you say? He is unworthy of any belief?"

"Quite! He would make up any story almost for the bare pleasure of exercising his invention, I really believe."

"Thank Heaven!" she whispered, as her

hands fell listlessly down at her sides, and for the moment Reginald thought she was fainting.

But she recovered even as he put his arm about her, and, freeing herself gently, looked up at him with grateful moist eyes as she held out her hand.

"Thank you," said she unsteadily. "You have relieved me from a terror I cannot describe, I could not understand. The man frightened me by hints and stories which seemed to take the very ground from under my feet. I have not recovered from the effects of them even now. Forgive me for being so silly, so incoherent; I will tell you—explain myself when I am—myself again."

He pressed her hand warmly in his, and let her go. Then he left the churchyard and went hastily in the direction he had seen "Mr. Howard" take. It was towards the station; and, seeing that there was no trace of that gentleman about and that a train had just started, Reginald came to the conclusion that Mr. Meadows's genial friend was satisfied that he had done mischief enough for one day; and, remounting his father's cob, on which he had

ridden over on the chance of getting a glimpse of Geraldine Lindley, he returned to Waringham Vicarage.

"But "Mr. Howard" was to do worse mischief than that before the day was over.

CHAPTER V.

GERALDINE returned home, still in such a state of bewilderment and nervous excitement that she did not know whether the effect of Mr. Howard's words had passed away, whether Reginald's assurances that the man was not to be believed had or had not relieved her mind from the weight of vague but terrible misgivings which the information he had volunteered and the hints he had thrown out had laid upon her. Miss Gretton was in some alarm because she had been out longer than usual; but Geraldine had self-command enough to describe in a lively manner how she had been tempted by primroses to walk further and to linger longer than she had intended, which satisfied her old friend, who, now past seventy, was not so lynx-eyed at detecting a shifting

glance or a change of colour as she had once been.

But when the girl was alone again, it was inevitable that she should discover that it was impossible for her to rest until she had seen Sir Charles and learnt from his own lips whether there was any particle of truth in the strange things she had been told, and, if not, what this man's motive could have been for deliberately hunting her out to distress her with them. After dinner—for Miss Gretton remained faithful to the school habit of dining in the middle of the day—she made an excuse to go out again, went back, half ashamed of herself, to the churchyard, and hunted about for the stranger's card. She had not looked at it when he had given it to her, and now she could not find it—she picked up, indeed, at a little distance from the spot where she had stood during her interview with the stranger, a gentleman's card on which was printed the name "Mr. Lindley Fielding" with an address in London, in the city, written below in pencil; but, knowing that the stranger's name was Howard, she thought at first that this card

must have fallen from his pocket-book by accident. However, she could find no other; and then the possibility of a man with no character having two names occurring to her, she put the card into her purse, slipped guiltily out of the churchyard, and as fast as she could walk to one of a row of cottages a little distance off. The mother of two of her Sunday-school scholars lived there; but, though Geraldine made the excuse of calling to know whether Eliza's cough was any better, she hardly heard Mrs. Boggett's answer.

"You used to live in Norfolk once, Mrs. Boggett, didn't you?" she asked, after a few remarks about the baby.

"Yes, miss, I was kitchen-maid two years in Mr. Fawcett's family at Thorpe. I was married from there, miss."

"Thorpe! Oh yes; that is near Waringham, isn't it?"

"Waringham! Bless ye, no, miss! Thorpe's miles and miles from Waringham. It takes nigh upon two hours by the railway to get to Thorpe."

"It—it doesn't take nearly so long to get

to Waringham, does it?" asked the girl, with hands which trembled so much that the astonished mite on her lap turned and feebly tried to slap her.

"Bless your heart, no! Why, it's only a walk from here to Waringham!"

"Oh yes, yes, of course! How far do you call it?"

"Well, it's a matter of three or four mile, I should say."

"Oh, it must be more than that!" broke out the girl, with sudden vehemence.

"Well, mayhap it is. I'm not much of a dab at guessing such things, and I don't know as I've ever heard tell the length of it rightly."

"How long does it take to walk there? Do you know, Mrs. Boggett?"

"Well, John can do it in a little over two hours; but then he's a good walker is John. But you wasn't thinking of walking over to Waringham—was ye, miss?"

"Oh no!" answered Geraldine, who indeed had no such intention. She had only taken the simplest means of finding out from the

ignorant woman how far her guardian's home really was from hers. She was satisfied now; and, after wishing "good day" to Mrs. Boggett, who guessed, from the young lady's absent manner, that something was amiss, she returned home, and, unable to face the old lady just yet, went straight to her own room to give way to an agony of suspense and misery. It was not that this little discovery was by itself very terrible; but this evidence that the stranger had told the truth on one point opened the possibility of his having done so concerning other matters. His strange statements, his mysterious hints, could only be explained away by Sir Charles; he was sure to call before the afternoon was over, as he had not been to Copsley for two days. She listened, on fire with impatience, for the sound of the bell, or of his horse's hoofs upon the drive; at last she stole into Miss Gretton's bedroom, which was in the front of the house, and watched with deepening anxiety for his long-delayed arrival. But the afternoon wore on into the evening, and Sir Charles never came. During the six years since her return from Paris he had never before

allowed so long a time as three days to elapse without coming to see his adopted child; and even Miss Gretton began to be anxious, and to wonder whether Sir Charles had had another of those attacks like the one he had had twelve years ago, when he had been threatened with paralysis. A sudden misgiving that the messenger of ill omen who had disturbed her own peace that morning had had something to do with the absence of her adored guardian filled Geraldine with alarm, and caused her to lie awake that night a prey to a thousand fantastic and torturing fears.

Her affection had put her apprehensions upon the right track. That very afternoon, within three hours of the time when the stranger left Geraldine in Copsley churchyard, the old servant Johnson, who, now that the number of servants at Waringham Hall was at last reduced, was butler, valet, and footman all in one, came to the door of Miss Eleanor Otway's room and told her that a gentleman wished to see her. Eleanor was sixty by this time, and more shrivelled and shrunken than ever; but this message put her into a flutter

of excitement and brought a tinge of orange to her cheeks. For she knew that Elizabeth was out, and knew that her visitor must be that family scapegrace upon whom, nearly thirty years ago, she had bestowed a limp but constant affection, of which he had many times since, when in pecuniary difficulties more embarrassing than usual, taken advantage. The best of those few family trinkets which had fallen to her share had one by one passed from her hands to his, together with such small sums as she could ill spare from her meagre allowance of pocket-money; and each of these remittances had been accompanied by a copy of some pocket devotional work and a pedantically phrased letter, punctuated with notes of exclamation, after the fashion of those ladies whose education has been of the slip-shod order, in which a less careless reader than the man to whom they were addressed might have detected the ring of a very pure and simple-hearted affection. He had, indeed, sometimes shed a maudlin tear upon one of these notes over the whiskey-and-water which her generosity had enabled him to procure; and he

had boasted of her devotion without letting his hearers know that this "good little cousin" was plain of feature and a good many years older than himself. But the condescendingly sentimental liking he had for her, on account of the lift to his own self-esteem which her constancy gave him, was a poor thing which the simple-minded object of it rated much too highly.

As she entered the seldom-used morning room into which she had directed that he should be shown, she was struck at once by the airy gaiety and ease of his manner, and thought at once they must portend some more than usually deep difficulty.

"What is the matter, Lindley?" she asked, her feeble voice shaking with anxiety. "What can have happened to bring you here? Don't you know that Elizabeth may return at any moment? She has only gone for a drive. And then—oh, what would she say?"

These young girl's words, spoken as they were without the least affectation, were oddly pathetic in the mouth of the leathern faced, bent old woman who would make, Lindley Fielding thought, as he examined her curiously

in the waning sunlight of the April afternoon, an excellent model for the Witch of Endor.

"She may say what she chooses when I have the pleasure of seeing her," said he, buoyantly. "One of the objects of my visit is to have a little important conversation with her; but of course my first care was to see you," he added, with gallant tenderness. "Do you know how long it will be before she returns?" he asked, after a pause, in which he had affectionately led her to a seat.

"I expect her every moment," answered Eleanor, nervously. "But do you think you are wise to face her, Lindley? I know you are very brave; but she says such bitter things, she has no mercy, she makes no allowances for the difference between men's temptations and women's sheltered position. I have often intimated this to her on your behalf—I have, indeed; but with little effect, I am afraid."

"Let her say what she pleases, Eleanor; I have something to say to her which will turn her hard words and sharp looks in another direction, I fancy. Is Charles at home?"

"Yes; but that doesn't matter. I am not afraid of Charles; it is only Elizabeth."

"And why be afraid of Elizabeth, my sweet cousin? Does she still bully and snub you both as she used to do?"

"Oh, Lindley, you should not say that! Her character is different from ours—not so easy to understand perhaps, but much stronger. She is the pillar of the family."

"Well, she is hard enough! However, I have come to pull the pillar down."

"Lindley!"

"Yes. She has done her best to turn every member of the family against me, and all for no better reason than that I preferred her more modest and retiring sister to her overbearing self," said he, fatuously.

"But that is all over now, Lindley," said Eleanor, rather pleased, in spite of herself. "We are all getting old now, and should forget such things. Why, do you know, it is nearly twenty years since we have seen each other!"

"Is it, indeed? It seems merely a few months to me," he responded quickly. He did not care for reminders of this sort; and, as for

her suggestion that it was time to "forget those things," why, he had never felt himself to be so eligible an object for the tender passion as he was now at mellow—well, forty! But of course it was very different with these old maids, and one must make allowance for them.

"You will think her rather *passée* now, I dare say, Lindley—that is, if you insist upon meeting her. But she is very handsome still—at least, we think so; you know she has always been the beauty of the family."

"Well, she will have to give up that place now, and on the whole I don't think she can complain that she has been hurried out of it. We will see if we can't give the county another beautiful Miss Otway, and one too whose title to loveliness it will be less easy to dispute."

"What do you mean, Lindley? We are the only Miss Otways left."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, of course I am; quite, quite sure. Unless, indeed, some upstarts of the same name are trying to pass themselves off as distant connections of ours!" said she, drawing herself up.

"Oh no! The lady I mean is in the direct line."

"But that is impossible—you know it is impossible, Lindley," she repeated querulously, looking up into his face with impatience, increased by the curious expression of triumphant conviction she read there. "Look here," she added, after a few moments' pause—"my father and his sister, your mother, were the only two Otways left in the direct line, weren't they?"

"Quite true."

"And, then, when Aunt Henrietta your mother, married Mr. Fielding, your father, why, then she ceased to be an Otway!"

"That is true also."

"So that papa was the only Otway left; and, now that he is dead, Charles and Elizabeth and I are the only Otways."

"But one."

"One! Which one? What do you mean, Lindley? Who is the other?"

Eleanor had risen to her feet, and was leaning upon her silver-headed taper crutch-stick, with her black eyes staring at him out

of the brown wrinkled face, like a sorceress frightened by some apparition she has herself conjured up.

"Yes, who is the other? I too should like to know that," struck in a hard, clear voice which seemed to cut the air; and, turning—even Lindley more startled than he chose to appear—they both saw that Elizabeth had entered the room, and was standing, looking as commanding in her brown stuffy gown as Eleanor looked insignificant in hers, with her long slim white fingers still upon the handle of the door, very dignified, very quiet, very cold.

Lindley moved towards her in a sauntering, airy manner, in which her sharp gaze detected something more than his old bravado.

"You shall know in good time, my dear cousin," said he, genially. "But I think, in common fairness, it is the head of the family who should have the privilege of learning the interesting secret first."

"And as, for all practical purposes, Lindley, I am the head of the family, as you very well know, in common fairness you will entrust the interesting secret to me," she urged, with care-

lessness so admirably feigned, that if it had been possible for her to be even as civil as this to him without a very strong motive, Lindley would have thought it real.

"I'm afraid I must steel myself to resist even your all-conquering fascination," said Lindley, showing his handsome teeth, only one of which was false, in a smile which was still admired by some women, though to his cousin Elizabeth at this moment it seemed a ghastly caricature of mature fascination at which she did not scruple to shudder.

"I suppose you know that, to bear legally the name of Otway, the person so bearing it must be the child of a gentleman of that name who has been legally married to that child's mother?"

"So I have been told, my fair cousin."

"And I suppose you know that the only living gentleman of the family bearing the name of Otway is my brother Charles?"

"My cousin Charles. I have heard something of the kind."

"And that he is the only person who could possibly be the father of such a child?"

This was put in exactly the same tone, but something in the glance of the cold, blue eyes told that this was more of a question than the others had been.

"I think I may even go with you as far as that," said Lindley, very slowly and impressively.

Her eyes showed that she did not believe him. However, she went on—

"You have come, then, to inform Sir Charles, my brother, of the existence of a legitimate child of his?" she asked, with a sneer.

"Your conjectures, as might be expected from you, show considerable penetration."

"Of whose legitimacy he was ignorant?"

"Wonderful, wonderful!"

"Otherwise, you see, your information would not be of sufficient value to encourage you to swagger in the house where you formerly cringed."

"Epigrammatically put, though severe, and still wonderful in its discernment, like all your other remarks."

Elizabeth made no show of impatience.

She stood confronting him like marble, except for the steely glitter of her cold, blue eyes. After a pause, she moved, turning slightly towards him; and, with a sudden smile which was like the flash of flint-and-steel, she said, in a lower, softer voice, and with a look of inquiring innocence—

"Does it often happen that a man marries and becomes the father of a child without knowing it?"

"Not often, I believe," answered the unabashed Lindley, in suave mimicry of her own tone.

"In such a case, no doubt, he would show deep gratitude to the person who put him in possession of such a bewildering piece of information?"

"I may say I believe that too."

"I think you may say, Lindley Fielding, that you reckoned upon it." Then, changing back to her old hard tone, she went on slowly, fixing upon him a steady gaze which, in spite of himself, made his full brown eyes shift their audacious glance from her face to the carpet, "You have a very ingenious plan, Lindley, for

inducing Sir Charles to adopt openly and proclaim as his legitimate child a girl less honourably connected with the family, to whom, as you know—for you keep yourself well informed of our affairs—he has become fondly and foolishly attached. You know that he is so absurdly infatuated about this girl that he would willingly seize upon any plan for openly adopting her as his daughter, and removing the prejudice which naturally rests upon the foundling. You know that he is ready to do this, even to the prejudice of his legitimate relatives, to the annoyance and open insult of his unattractive old sisters. You, therefore, not unnaturally reckon upon persuading him to take this course without much difficulty; and, in return for your suggestion, and for your undertaking to provide the necessary story and the necessary witnesses to the—h'm—the truth of it, you also not unnaturally reckon upon—his gratitude."

"Really, Elizabeth, in the art of making a story I yield to you most humbly. I am quite astounded—overwhelmed by your eloquence; the more so as this fascinating fiction

of yours has not had the assistance of the least basis of truth. But it would be idle to insist on that point; your blushing modesty would still lead you to forego the claim of such striking invention. Therefore, I will withdraw myself from your presence to ponder on your genius alone, or perhaps to join in admiration of it with my cousin, your brother, the head of the family—in fact, with Sir Charles."

He bowed, and airily and swiftly went out by the second and less used door, which led into the dining-room, thus avoiding any personal collision with his dignified cousin, who had drawn herself up where she stood in a rather menacing manner. She turned sharply; but it was too late—he was gone.

Poor Eleanor had sunk, trembling like a leaf, down on the sofa during this scene, which she had witnessed in terror, turning her bead-like black eyes from the one to the other as thrust succeeded thrust in the short dialogue, and uttering from time to time a faint exclamation of protest, of which neither took the slightest heed. She now started up as if to detain Lindley; but, as he had already left the

room by the time she was on her feet, she fell back again on to the chintz-covered cushions, with their old-fashioned pattern of huge flowers, whose gaudy colours had now long been toned down, and looked at her sister in querulous reproach.

Elizabeth's blue eyes were still bright with a sort of ice-bound fire.

"What did he say to you before I came, Eleanor? Did he tell you why he had come? What reason did he give?"

"Oh, Elizabeth, I don't know! Don't look at me like that. He said nothing in particular. He just said he had a secret—— No; he said there was another Miss Otway, and then you came in. He said no more about it, indeed."

"Oh, you had something more interesting to talk about, I suppose!" sneered the other, coldly. "I am afraid you have not used your influence over your admirer to the best advantage, or he would not now be occupied in trying to turn us both out of our home by foisting his own child upon our brother."

"His own child! Lindley's child!" cried Eleanor, in horror.

"Yes. I have long suspected it; to-day I am sure of it."

"You mean the girl Charles has educated?" faltered Eleanor.

"Yes. On the very night when misfortune brought the wretched child here her likeness to Aunt Henrietta's portrait woke my suspicions. It was a trick of Lindley's, a very clever trick; and it is not surprising that he is so triumphant over its success. But he is going a little too fast now, and I fancy I can impede his last all-important step."

"What do you mean, Elizabeth?"

"He will try to persuade Charles to declare this peasant woman's waif to be his own legitimate child. The girl is handsome, they tell me—in fact, I have taken care to see her, and, unluckily, her appearance is in favour of this infamous plan. Now that — now that Charles has no heir, owing to—to our last terrible misfortune five years ago, you see nobody would be injured by such an arrangement but us; and Charles would salve over his conscience in that respect by saying to himself that he would take care to provide

for us, and that, when we knew her better, she would be the light of our lives, or some such nonsense. And then he would shuffle and delay as usual, until at his death it would be found, just as it was when poor papa died, that we were left with nothing. We should be at the mercy of this vagrant girl, who would grudge us the means of living like tradesmen's widows in apartments at Yarmouth or Lowestoft. This is what your favourite is trying to bring about, Eleanor; but, in the face of my accusations, Charles will not dare to keep steadfast to the lie."

"Oh, Elizabeth, all this will kill me, I am sure it will!" moaned the other, falling into her usual formula in times of excitement. "I suppose the girl will let me be buried in the vault at Gillingstone; it won't cost much to have my body taken there?"

But the question did not interest her sister, who left the room with no other answer than a glance of contempt at the inability of the other to grasp a situation so full of danger. She hesitated in the hall for a few moments, debating whether she should go upstairs to

her room and take off the outdoor garments she was still wearing, or knock at the door of the library to disturb her brother and cousin in the concoction of their scheme. She decided that a bold accusation when the plot was ripe would be the more effective plan; and she had walked towards the staircase, which was in an inner hall in the centre of the house, when a noise from the library caused her to stop short. It was the unmistakable sound of a heavy fall. She turned back, and was at the door of the library in a moment. There was no further sound inside but the sharp rustle of paper—no voice, no tread. She turned the handle quickly, and called—

"Charles!"

There was no answer; but the sound inside ceased.

"Charles!" she called again.

Again no answer; but she heard a very soft footstep in the room. She did not scruple to put her eye to the keyhole; but all she could see was a part of the table and some books on it.

"Charles!" she repeated, in a louder tone. "Open the door, or I shall think something has

happened to you, and I shall send Johnson to get in by the window."

This threat brought Lindley to the door, which he unlocked and opened, with a face of well-expressed horror and distress.

"Come in! Call the servants! Where is the bell?" he cried, stepping back into the room and holding open the door for Elizabeth to enter. "Come and help me to raise poor Charles. He is in a fit, I'm afraid."

Elizabeth crossed the room, pulled aside the heavy screen which shut in her brother's favourite corner near the fire, and saw him lying on his face on the floor, close by the large bureau which stood opposite the fireplace, and a few feet from it. She touched the bell, and was on her knees beside him in a moment, trying to raise him, without a word to the effusive Lindley, who fidgeted officiously about the room, but refrained from again offering to join his services to hers, warned by the hasp-like manner in which her well-cut mouth was closed. As soon as she had discovered that her brother was not dead, she looked up and said quietly—

"Why did you not ring at once?"

"I lost my head for a moment. I thought —I thought something had happened to him; I threw myself down beside him and begged him to speak to me."

"Strange that I heard him fall, but did not hear your voice! Why did you not let me in at once?"

"I did let you in as soon as I heard you. But I was so much occupied with poor Charles——"

"No," said she, sharply, "not with poor Charles, but with poor Charles's papers."

He winced ever so slightly, then turned away as if this woman's wearisome suspicions were beneath contempt.

"I really cannot condescend to answer any more of your ridiculous and heartless speeches," said he, with dignity. "At such a moment as this, when your brother's life may be in danger, I really should have thought you would be occupied with something more serious than my imaginary crimes."

At this moment they were interrupted by the entrance of Johnson, who, with Lindley's

help, raised the baronet from the floor and placed him, still unconscious, upon the sofa. Then Elizabeth gave her cousin a hint that he might retire, which even he was fain to take; and he left the Hall, airily promising the butler, who knew quite well what this gentleman's welcome was likely to be, that he would return to make inquiries.

Elizabeth had sent to Goldborough for a doctor; but in the meantime she despatched one of the servants with a note to a retired physician who lived near, begging him to come and see her brother, saying she scarcely knew whether he was alive or dead. Old Mr. Crosse came at once and pronounced, as she had guessed, that the baronet was struck by paralysis. They carried him upstairs to his own room; and, as soon as Elizabeth had seen him laid on the huge-canopied wooden bed she hastened downstairs again to the library.

Even after that short absence she took the precaution of looking out of both the high windows right and left into the dusk, and of glancing into every corner of the room in which

it was possible for any one to hide. She saw no one, however; and, after ringing for a lamp, which she placed upon the bureau, she told Johnson to close the shutters. It was early in the day to do this, which was generally done while the family were at dinner, and he obeyed with a good deal of unexpressed surprise. As soon as she was alone again, she turned over all the papers lying about; none of them were of the least importance. Sir Charles, dilatory and indolent as he was, had certain soldierly habits of order; and such of the drawers of his bureau as were not securely locked contained nothing of interest or value. Lindley had not had much time for ferreting, and, unless he had managed to obtain possession of Sir Charles's keys, in which case the look-out kept for his re-appearance could not be too close, there was not much to fear from his industry and research, great as those were in him when a work of mischief was in question. Whether he had any clear object in view in the foraging over which she had interrupted him, or whether he had been merely putting a spare moment to profit on the chance of lighting upon

something out of which capital might be made, she did not know. Times of illness and death, when a household is of course somewhat disorganized and has something better to do than to keep guard over every scrap of paper, are just the times when an intelligent outsider may make himself master of many a little bit of useful information ; and Lindley Fielding would not be slow to take advantage of any opportunity of this kind. She left the library, locking the door, and taking away the key, and went to the drawing-room, where poor Eleanor, with a smelling-bottle in one hand, a devotional work, "On the Way of Using Severe Affliction as Discipline for the Soul," in the other, was sobbing on the sofa by the white hearthrug.

Elizabeth retreated at once, and went upstairs to her brother's room. After a few words to the old housekeeper, who was watching beside him, and a glance at the unconscious figure with closed eyes and head slightly moving from side to side on the pillow, she examined the clothes he had worn that day, and in one of the pockets found his keys.

And, her sisterly solicitude being now satisfied, she went to her own room, where she remained until, the bell being silent on account of the invalid, Johnson came to announce to her that dinner was ready.

CHAPTER VI.

On the following morning Sir Charles was no better; he still lay without speech, almost without movement, either with his eyes closed or else with them fixed on the ceiling in a painful frowning stare, as if vainly trying to recall some memory which had escaped him. Both his sisters visited him early; the elder to shrink down on to her knees at his bedside to offer up a prayer for him, and to make a faint offer of her services as nurse—the younger to survey him very critically, wondering what shock it was which had had such a terrible effect upon him.

On leaving his bedside, she went downstairs to the library, unlocked the door, let herself in, and, taking from her pocket the keys she had found the night before in her brother's

coat, she opened successively the locked drawers of the bureau to try to satisfy a vague wonder whether there was any secret in his life which Lindley had in some way got hold of, and was trying to trade upon. But there was nothing which contained the least intimation of that sort, though Elizabeth, in her hunt for this chance prize, came upon certain papers which explained something that had long been exercising her mind, and fully repaid her for this rather adventurous search.

For, by certain receipts and memoranda which she discovered, the indignant lady found out by what means her brother had for so many years supported and educated his adopted child, and also was enabled to ascertain for the first time how much his freak had cost him. And, in her first outbreak of solitary rage at the discovery that the expenses of his undertaking had been rather more than double what he had represented to them, and that he had had to sell two of his farms and to cut down some timber unknown to her to meet them, Elizabeth started up and stepped forward to the door, as if seized by an irresistible impulse to vent

her wrath upon the unconscious figure lying upstairs. She had scarcely turned the key in the lock, however, when her reason returned, and, half ashamed of her action, though her anger was as violent as ever, she turned sharply back, forgetting to relock the door, and, returning to her place at the bureau behind the screen, she bent again, with tightly pressed lips and glittering eyes, over the evidences of her brother's criminal deceit and extravagance.

She was roused from her occupation by a very soft little chuckle of amusement; and, as she raised her head quickly, her eyes met those of Lindley Fielding, who had come into the room as softly as a cat, and who was watching her round the screen with a malicious delight on his blandly smiling face, which turned the torrent of her fury upon him.

"How dare you sneak into this house again, after the mischief you have done in it?" she demanded, rising, her cold eyes flashing, her voice low but harsh with anger.

"I came to see whether you had recovered from the effects of sitting up all night nursing your brother," replied Lindley, softly. "I did

not know that I should find you so pleasantly employed. Charles is well enough to have sent you to look for something, perhaps—for some paper of interest and importance? Or are you hunting on your own account?"

"Leave the room and leave the house, or I will have you turned out."

"Very well; turn me out. Go and ring the bell."

She could not do this without leaving him in possession of the bureau, he thought; but he underrated the woman's audacity. Carefully glancing at the papers upon which her hands were lying, she replaced them coolly in one of the little drawers of the bureau, locked it, touched the handles of two or three of the other drawers to see that they were securely fastened; and then, putting the keys into her pocket, she walked to the fireplace and rang the bell sharply.

"Bravo!" said Lindley.

Elizabeth looked at her cousin again, but this time not with anger—that had no effect upon him—but with searching inquiry. What did he know? There was something porten-

tous in the permanence of his serene insolence. He was a man without ballast, and at the mercy of fortune, good or bad: she began to feel that he must be on smooth waters to be so confident; and insensibly her manner changed. Watching each other keenly as they were doing, no faintest relaxation of feature was lost upon Lindley, who asked himself, in his turn—

"Does she guess anything? What does she know?"

She remained at the bureau; but, after occupying herself for a few moments with the loose papers lying on it, she raised her head, and said shortly—

"Sit down, Lindley."

He accepted the abrupt and somewhat ungracious invitation with outward calmness; but his curiosity was roused, and increased when, upon Johnson's appearance, instead of the threatened order to show him out, his cousin merely uttered the words—

"Bring some sherry."

Lindley appeared to take no notice of this change of front, but, with hands easily crossed upon the rail of his chair and eye-glass up, sat

looking out into the park, waiting in wise silence for her next move.

She said nothing until the sherry was brought; and then, signing to him to help himself, which he did liberally without hesitation, she began, in a quiet, business-like tone, drawing upon the blotting-paper in front of her, and very intent upon that work—

"Look here, Lindley, if you have anything of real interest to tell, it may be as well worth your while to tell me as to tell Charles."

"Worth my while, Elizabeth!"—dropping his eye-glass from his eye in his wounded surprise. "I don't understand you."

"Don't you, really? Well, I will explain. The gratitude you expected from Charles for the information you had to impart to him may take an even more substantial form in my hands than in his."

"Really, Elizabeth, if you think I am a person to be bribed, especially in a matter where the family honour is concerned, you make a great mistake," said Lindley, putting down a large piece of cake which he had cut for himself, in order to be more free to ex-

press the proud indignation he felt at her suggestion.

He was so sternly incorruptible that she felt he mistrusted her power to fulfil her implied promises.

"Oh, the family honour is concerned, is it?"

"Yes," he replied, taking up his cake again.

"Ah!" she ejaculated incredulously. When Lindley began to talk of the family honour he lost weight directly.

"I came here," he continued, with dignity, "on a mission of justice. I have been the victim of so much injustice myself throughout my life—partly perhaps through a certain recklessness of the opinion of others, which may be a fault in my character—that I can feel for other victims of injustice, and exert myself for them as no one has ever exerted himself for me. When the victim is a woman, my chivalry comes to the aid of my indignation, and then I do not care to what misrepresentation I lay myself open in my endeavour to obtain justice for her."

"And in this case justice means——"

"Charles's acknowledgment of his own child."

"Or of yours as his own?"

"Your suspicions are unworthy of your discernment. What motive could I have for such a suggestion?"

"A very good one, or, at least, one quite good enough for—for your purpose. Charles has no heir. If he were to acknowledge this girl as his legitimate child, he would leave all he possesses to her; and it may have occurred to you that it is better to be the unacknowledged father of the heiress to even such a poor property as this than to be the acknowledged father of a girl without a penny."

"I repeat, Elizabeth, that I am not the father of the girl in question at all. You don't seem to know how old she is, to begin with. Charles's daughter is twenty-two or twenty-three at least."

"And you are forty-eight or forty-nine at least, Lindley, though I acknowledge that you don't look it by this light."

For he had changed his seat, and was now sitting with his back to the windows. This

shaft struck home; his plump well-shaped hands twitched and trembled, as they did when anything moved him strongly. When he spoke again, it was in a softly argumentative tone.

"Do you think, Elizabeth, that it was anything less than a statement of vital interest to him which had such an effect upon Charles as to strike him down with paralysis?"

"No, I do not," she answered coolly. Then, after a pause—"You struck a little too hard; you made your statement a little too interesting; for, if he should die, as the doctors fear, without recovering power enough to speak, you see all your efforts in the cause of the 'victim of injustice' will be thrown away."

"I hope not—I may say I am sure they will not be. Charles has in his possession written proofs"—and he looked at her very fixedly—"of the truth of the story which, if anything were to happen to him, I should repeat to his executors; and then, even if it were too late for her to benefit pecuniarily by the establishment of her true position, at least the poor girl would be released," continued Lindley, his tone rising to the occasion, "from

the stigma which has long so unjustly lain upon her."

"Charles has written proofs, you say? How do you know that?"

"Perhaps he told me; perhaps I found out from a different source. At any rate, I can produce other proofs in support of them. Besides," continued Lindley, in a more assured tone, "we may still hope that Charles will recover, at any rate sufficiently to acknowledge his child."

"As I have told you, he is speechless, and it is greatly to be feared that he will remain so until his death, which cannot—so the doctors are afraid—be far distant."

"But he is conscious; your man-servant told me so."

Elizabeth's lips contracted with annoyance.

"The sight of some one he was very fond of," continued Lindley, growing warm, "might give him temporary strength; at least it could not do him any harm. Well, then, let this girl be brought into his presence; let him be prepared for her coming, if you please, and then see what the effect will be."

"Are you dreaming? Is it possible you think I could be guilty of allowing a ghastly experiment to be tried upon a dying man?"

"I do not believe, Elizabeth, that Charles is dying. Whom have you had to see him? A pack of incompetent country practitioners quite at sea in any case worse than measles or tooth-ache. Now, in order to do my best to remedy the evil I have so unhappily caused in breaking my tidings to Charles too suddenly, I have sent to town for a physician who is renowned for his treatment of cases of paralysis—Doctor Ledbury; and he has telegraphed that he will arrive at Goldborough by the 2.25 express from Liverpool Street; he will be here by a little past six."

"He shall not see Charles!" broke out Elizabeth, vehemently. "No doctor of your sending shall enter the house."

"You cannot insult a man of the standing of Doctor Ledbury," said Lindley quietly.

This was undeniable. He was a man of the highest rank in his profession. Elizabeth's frame shook with rage.

"You have taken a great liberty in sending for him without consulting us!"

"In the case of the dangerous illness of a member of my own family," Lindley argued gravely, his brown eyes bright with triumphant light, "no effort I could make to restore him to life and health could possibly be a liberty. As it was I who sent for him, will you allow me to be present when he arrives?"

"No," answered Elizabeth shortly; "I can tell him all that is necessary. I am quite satisfied that Doctor Foley and Mr. Crosse have done all that is possible for poor Charles; but, as you have sent for Doctor Ledbury, I suppose he must see him. At what time did you say he would be here?"

"The train gets into Goldborough at 5.51."

"Then I will send the carriage to meet him. Eleanor wants to go to Goldborough; she can explain the case to Doctor Ledbury. That will save time."

Eleanor's explanation was not likely to be valuable; but Lindley understood perfectly well that this was only a measure of precaution to prevent his meeting the great London physician himself, and prejudicing his mind

in the case. He acquiesced in this arrangement, however, having no excuse for upsetting it. Then Elizabeth rose.

"Now, I will have no tricks, Lindley," she told him, growing more and more dissatisfied as his satisfaction evidently increased. "Doctor Ledbury shall see Charles; and I hope that, by the help of Heaven, he may be able to restore him," she said in a hard voice, "though I fear it is very unlikely," she added with Christian resignation. "But, understand me, Lindley, not at the instance of all the doctors in the world will I allow poor Charles's last hours to be disturbed by the presence of an intruder, or any person whom I consider an intruder. I shall give orders that, after Doctor Ledbury's arrival, no person shall be admitted into the house upon any pretext whatever; and I shall take even stronger measures than that to enforce my wishes—my resolves for my brother's peace. So that, I warn you, it will be of no use for you and the girl in whom you take such a nobly unselfish interest to lurk about watching for an opportunity of making an entrance, for I shall be on the watch against any such attempt, and

I would bar the way, if necessary, with my own person."

"I swear," said Lindley, standing erect and speaking most impressively, "that I will make no such attempt. It is far from my wish to increase the affliction which I have been the unwitting means of bringing upon you. I feel that affliction more acutely than any of you on that account. It was in trying to repair the injury done to an innocent girl that I was the unhappy cause of this family calamity. I have done my best to atone for that by sending for Doctor Ledbury. I will now leave you, and I can assure you that my prayer for poor Charles's recovery shall not be wanting."

Lindley was always the first and generally the only dupe of his own hypocrisy; and he felt at this moment what his melodious and full voice expressed—a sentiment of deep and pious compassion for the victim of his lofty motives.

Elizabeth, who had heard his last speech without much attention, her mind occupied with something more important than Lindley's oaths or Lindley's prayers, stopped him as he was preparing to take leave.

"After all, you had better stay, perhaps—if you will. It is two o'clock; luncheon will be ready directly; and, if you know Doctor Ledbury personally——"

"I don't," interrupted Lindley; "I have seen him once, and that is all. I really don't think it is necessary for me——"

"Yes, yes; perhaps it is better that there should be a man in the house," she insisted, not troubling herself to be complimentary in this excuse for detaining her cousin at the Hall, where, it had suddenly occurred to her, he would be under her eye.

She grew warmer in her invitation as he showed a wish to evade it, and at last she prevailed over his reluctance; and, to Eleanor's surprise, the two who had hurled defiance at each other the day before now came in to luncheon together, apparently on the most friendly terms. The elder sister was too much puzzled and almost alarmed by this mystery to join much in the conversation; but the other two kept up an animated talk without her help. Lindley suggested that the Vicar should be sent for; and Elizabeth, wondering that this

proposal should have been left to him, agreed to it, and went into the morning-room to write a note as soon as they rose from table. When she joined the other two in the drawing-room, Eleanor was standing on the white hearthrug, with her little woollen shawl round her shoulders, shivering over the fire, while Lindley was standing at one of the long windows, which he had opened, speaking to a stupid-looking boy of about twelve, who was employed from time to time about the place to help the under-gardener. Eleanor was looking frightened, without any apparent reason: a breath of soft April air coming across the wide room was scarcely enough to cause alarm in the most sensitive of elderly ladies; and Lindley, leaning easily against the window-frame, was only talking about tulips. Elizabeth's sharp eyes glanced from the one to the other; but she could read nothing more in either face.

"This young gentleman will take your note, Elizabeth," said he cheerfully, having already assumed towards his imperious cousin the tone of the affectionate and intimate companion of years' standing. In his heart he knew that she was

tolerating his society that she might keep a watch upon his movements; but he preferred to cheat himself into the belief that she was not insensible to the charm of his presence; and, encouraged in his efforts to be entertaining by that assumption, he was actually succeeding in turning her tolerance into a sort of half-contemptuous pleasure in his society. "He says he could find his way to the Vicar's blindfold; that he was there only last week 'a-cleanin' of the winders and a-weedin' of the garden'—so you could not have a safer messenger."

So she would have thought herself, had he not been Lindley's choice; however, there seemed to be really no cause for hesitation about so simple a matter; so she gave her note herself to the boy, with the clear and short instruction that he was to take it to the Vicarage, and that there was no answer. The Vicarage was only a few minutes' walk from the park-gates.

Joe had not left the drawing-room window to start on his errand ten minutes when there was a ring heard; and a few moments later Johnson ushered in the Vicar. Elizabeth looked

surprised—Mr. Bamber was by no means an active man, and her request had not been urgent. It was years since he had seen Lindley Fielding; but he knew him and was evidently not surprised to meet him.

"I got your note," said he to Elizabeth, "and yours"—turning to Lindley; "so of course I came at once."

Why had Lindley written? What had made him so anxious for the Vicar's coming?

When he had expressed his condolences very simply, Elizabeth led him upstairs to her brother's room, not without an anxious glance at her cousin, expressing the question, "What mischief will he contrive to do now?"

They went very softly into the sick-room; but they had scarcely entered when the sound of the closing of the drawing-room door woke Elizabeth's quick suspicions; and, after leading the way to her brother's bedside and seeing that he was conscious, she modestly retreated, leaving the clergyman standing by the sick man, while the old housekeeper, who was watching at a little distance, respectfully rose and stood while the Vicar remained.

Elizabeth found her cousin still safely in the drawing-room, talking to Eleanor; and she wondered whether it was perhaps one of the servants whom she had heard closing the door, which always creaked in a manner not to be mistaken. Was it a *ruse* of Lindley's to draw her downstairs? she wondered, when, on her going to meet the Vicar on his way from the sick-room, he answered to her question whether she had found her brother sensible—

"Yes; but much disturbed in mind. He could not speak, though he tried very hard; but I gathered from his expression and slight movements, in reply to my questions, that he is very anxious—to see some one."

Elizabeth started, and her face changed colour. This, then, was the explanation of Lindley's manœuvre—he had put the Vicar on the track of certain questions to ask about that miserable girl!

"Don't you think," said the Vicar, hesitatingly—for he was extremely shy of interference in family matters—"that at a time like this you ought to—well, to yield to his wishes? Don't you think it would be better?"

"I am afraid, Mr. Bamber, that in this matter my own idea of my duty forbids me to do so."

"But do you know who she is?" asked the Vicar slowly, his guttural rattling voice giving added solemnity to the question.

"Yes, I do," she answered, with great significance.

The Vicar looked at her, and then in front of him.

"Oh, very well!" was all he said; but his tone made her feel uncomfortable. What was he thinking? What was he going to do? Was he, too, on the enemy's side? She watched him walk, with his stooping, shambling gait, down the drive towards the park-gates, and returned to the others with a mind full of anxiety, and with the bitterest feelings against the cunning Lindley, who was going through a caricature of pastoral love-making with Eleanor.

Time dragged heavily until the hour came for the carriage to start for Goldborough, to meet the train by which the famous physician was to arrive. Eleanor was very nervous at having to go to meet him; but her sister

insisted—she wanted some spy to see that no message from Lindley should reach Doctor Ledbury to prejudice or prepare him, as he had done the Vicar. So the poor little lady went off submissively in the barouche ; and the rival conspirators were left to entertain each other.

It was a trying *tête-à-tête*. Their open defiance exchanged for masked guard on each other's movements, they tried to keep up a conversation upon indifferent subjects, while each slightest sound above or outside thrilled them both—the debonair fluent man of the world and the still handsome cold-faced woman —with the wild excitement of keen expectation. Would this world-famed physician succeed in restoring Sir Charles to speech ? If he should, however temporary the restoration might be, Elizabeth knew that Lindley would secure his aim ; that, whether truly or falsely, the outcast child who had so strangely come beneath the roof of Waringham Hall would be acknowledged by Sir Charles Otway as his own daughter.

When Johnson brought in the lamp, they both started guiltily ; and when at last they

heard the sound of hoofs and wheels coming nearer and nearer to the house, Elizabeth drew a sharp breath, and Lindley Fielding, less self-controlled, started to his feet with staring eyeballs and face moist with agitation.

In a few moments the bell rang; the front door was opened immediately, faint sounds in the hall were followed by the flinging open of the drawing-room door, as Johnson announced solemnly—

"Doctor Ledbury!"

Lindley glanced stealthily at his cousin. She looked cold, dignified, anxious; but there was in her face no doubt, no suspicion. Breathing more freely, he too turned his eyes towards the door as the physician entered.

CHAPTER VII.

The entrance of the celebrated Doctor Ledbury into the drawing-room at Waringham Hall made a profound impression upon its occupants. He was a man so striking in appearance that this would, in a less degree, have been the case even if the fate of almost every member of the household had not hung upon the results of his skill, which was about to be exercised upon the master of Waringham, now lying speechless upstairs.

Doctor Ledbury was a man of tall and commanding figure, with fair hair and long, well-trimmed tawny beard, handsome aquiline nose, and blue eyes as cold and piercing as those of Miss Elizabeth Otway herself. He looked young for a man who had attained so high a place in his profession, in spite of the

gold-rimmed spectacles he wore; the only sign by which it was possible to tell that the sleek brilliancy of his appearance was the result, not of youth, but of careful preservation, was in his walk, which was measured and rather heavy, not that of a young man. He spoke very little, very slowly, and in a deep low voice, listened gravely to Elizabeth's brief explanation of the case he had been summoned to attend, and then asked—

"Result of some shock, I suppose?"

"I—I believe so."

"You were not present?"

"No."

"Any one present?"

Elizabeth hesitated. The physician waited. At last she said—

"Yes, one person."

"I was present at the time of Sir Charles's seizure, Doctor Ledbury. I am his cousin. Indeed, I am afraid it was a disclosure made by me with unthinking suddenness which produced on my poor cousin such lamentable results," said Lindley, coming forward and bowing to the great physician, who examined

him attentively through his gold-rimmed glasses.

"What effect does your presence have on him now?"

They had to listen very closely to catch the sense of the great man's words, so low did he speak, besides having apparently a slight difficulty of utterance.

"I have not seen my cousin since his seizure."

The doctor looked at him steadily, evidently surprised.

"You had better see him now. The sight of you may have some effect. Kindly show me the way."

His quiet manner was so authoritative that Elizabeth, who had started at his suggestion, dared not interfere. Fortune was with Lindley still; in powerless rage she had to witness his triumphant departure from the room with the physician. For one wild moment the thought possessed her that this doctor, summoned by Lindley, was in collusion with him; but then her reason told her that a man of his position was above suspicion; the next, the suspicion

flashed through her mind that this might not be Doctor Ledbury at all, although she had seen his telegram announcing the hour of his coming; but that idea had also to be dismissed, for nothing could be more unlike the bearing of an impostor than the grave dignity and assured manner of the man, whose shrewd, penetrating glance had exercised upon herself a strange fascination. She was not surprised when, having listened with straining ears to the last sound of the footsteps of the two men as they crossed the central hall and went up the staircase, Lindley talking volubly all the time, Eleanor entered the room, still wearing her bonnet, and, coming close up to her sister with tottering steps, whispered—

"Oh, Elizabeth, he frightens me! Oh, I would not go through that drive again with him for the world!"

"Why, what makes you afraid of him? He is neither old, ugly, nor ferocious, unless he is very different *en tête-à-tête* from what he is at other times. How did you meet him?"

"The London train came in just as I drove

up, and a minute after he came out of the station; he was looking about; so I guessed who he was and spoke to him."

"So, then, he frightened you coming along, did he? What did he say?"

"He didn't say anything—at least he said scarcely anything. He apologized to me for opening his pocket-book, and he looked at it and read and made notes in it nearly all the time."

"Well, that was not very alarming."

"Oh, but you don't know! There was something in the way he did it which seemed to say that he did not want my company, and that I ought not to have come. But it was more than that, Elizabeth; he had a horrible effect upon me; he is one of those terribly clever people who read one through and through at a glance; his eyes are like lancets. If he were to come to attend me, I should die at once, I know I should."

"Indeed, I believe that a sillier doctor would be quite as able to treat you successfully," said her sister, drily.

Elizabeth was beginning to take courage

from her very confidence in this man's penetration ; he was not likely to be the dupe of such a man as Lindley, nor at all the sort of person to encourage dying delusions in his patient. Nevertheless, she was restless and feverishly impatient as time wore on and there was no sound to be heard above. Sir Charles's bedroom was over the smaller drawing-room. She left the lamp and the fire and the place where she and her sister usually sat, and, crossing to the dim cold corner under the spot where her brother lay, she listened in vain for some sound overhead. At last her endurance gave way, and she softly opened the door ; after a few seconds' hesitation, she glided softly and quickly through the large, ill-lighted outer hall into the small, worse-lighted inner one, where she was stopped with a great shock by coming suddenly against a motionless figure at the foot of the staircase. She was in a state of such nervous excitement that the meeting almost forced a cry even from her resolute lips. It was Johnson the man-servant.

"What are you doing here?" she asked sharply.

"Mr. Fielding told me to be about, ma'am; he said he might want me," replied Johnson, respectfully.

"And since when have you taken your orders from Mr. Fielding?" she asked coldly, but stung to fury by the discovery of the progress this ne'er-do-well cousin, on the strength of his secret, was making into the very heart of the household affairs.

Johnson stood in a respectfully deprecatory attitude, saying nothing.

"You need not wait any longer. I will answer for your neglect of his orders to Mr. Fielding," she said, in a hard, ironical tone; and she passed him and went upstairs.

Johnson, however, merely retreated to the deep shadow of the oaken staircase until she was out of sight, and then quietly returned and took up his old position, waiting. He hated Miss Elizabeth, he adored his old master, and he would not have missed the smallest chance of being near Sir Charles, or of serving him when he was dying, for a regiment of cold-eyed Miss Otways. So he stood mentally ejaculating, "The old cat! The old spy!" as he

listened to his mistress's stealthy footsteps outside her brother's door.

She was listening, with her head nearer and nearer to the keyhole, to the sound of a long, earnest recital of some kind, told in a whisper. Who the speaker was, whether it was Lindley or the physician, she could not tell. Closer and closer she bent to the door handle, more and more sharply she drew her breath as the sound continued, until there was at last a pause; and then she heard her brother's voice, weak, indistinct, but intelligible, saying—

"Yes, yes; I understand it all—all."

Great Heavens! Then Lindley had not overrated Doctor Ledbury's skill; the physician had, indeed, restored speech to the dumb man. Her excitement, her feverish anxiety to know what that passionately hissed-out tale was which had been poured out into the sick man's ear, overcame her self-control somewhat; her breath came quickly, her frame shook so much that the hanging ends of the old-fashioned chain she wore round her neck tapped against each other with a faint noise. As she stooped to look through the keyhole, it was suddenly

blocked by another inquiring eye on the other side. Without further ceremony, she raised herself and sharply turned the handle. It was of no use—the door was locked.

"Who is there?" said Lindley's voice, very quietly.

"It is I, Elizabeth Otway," she answered, in her grimmest tone.

"Hush! Don't speak so loudly!" he whispered back, in his sweetest manner. "Charles is much better; he can speak. I will come out and tell you all about it in a few minutes; but he must not be disturbed just now; Doctor Ledbury says it is a critical moment."

That was true enough, as the tortured woman knew. She stood there a moment irresolute, panting like a tigress, with eyes fixed upon the door in front of her, as if it needed but one pang more of maddening anxiety to make her force it open or tear it down; then, without another word to her enemy inside, she softly withdrew, and creeping a few steps further along the corridor, she opened the door of Sir Charles's dressing-room. There was a candle

on the table, and beside it Mrs. Symes was sitting, with her long, lean, sharp old face a livid grayish hue from terror. Her mistress passed the old woman, who had staggered slowly to her feet, and tried the bedroom door. It was locked, like the other.

"What does this mean?" she asked, in a low imperious tone, stepping back to the housekeeper's side.

"They have locked it, ma'am. He—the doctor—sent me into this room, and told me to wait——"

She hesitated, shaking from head to foot.

"And then?" queried Elizabeth, on fire with impatience.

"Then I heard—I heard——"

"Well, well, go on. You heard?"

"I heard Sir Charles's voice call out, ma'am, quite strong and sudden."

"What did he call out?'

"I—I—I don't know, I was that dazed like, I couldn't tell, ma'am," she stammered.

"Well, well; but was it words he said, or only just a cry? You remember as much as that, don't you?" asked Elizabeth, lapsing into

the winning, encouraging tones she could use upon occasion.

"I—I really couldn't tell you, ma'am. I was just sitting there, and it took me unexpected like, as I may say, and I know no more than the child unborn what he did say."

"Mr. Lindley has been speaking to you since." This was not a question, but a confident assertion, while the sharp eyes pierced through the old woman's hesitancy like gimlets.

"No-o—yes, ma'am."

A momentary confusion was a natural enough result of that raking investigation. But Miss Elizabeth had no mercy.

"And he has been persuading you, ordering you, bribing you not to repeat what you heard. You see, Mrs. Symes, it is of no use for you to attempt to deceive me; you had better tell me the whole truth at once."

"Mrs. Symes!" Lindley's voice here called out from the bedroom.

"Yes, sir," she answered, in a faltering voice.

"Come here to the door. I want to speak to you."

The old housekeeper glanced at Elizabeth, who, anxious to hear what Lindley had to say, signed to her to obey. But no sooner had Mrs. Symes gone close to the bedroom door and said in a low voice, "I am here, sir," than the key was swiftly turned, the door opened, and she was drawn quickly into the bedroom by a hand laid upon her arm. As Elizabeth, on the alert, crossed the room to follow, the door was closed and the key again turned. She knocked at once.

"Who is it?" asked Lindley's voice.

"It is I. I insist upon your letting me in; if Mrs. Symes can be admitted, why cannot I? What trick is this, to keep his nearest and dearest relatives from my poor brother's bedside? Doctor Ledbury, I insist——"

Suddenly the door was opened, and the doctor himself appeared at it. Startled by his unexpected presence at the entrance, over-awed by the indignant solemnity of his manner and by the magnetic power of his cold, keen eyes, she broke off in the middle of her speech and stood silently before him.

"It is for me to insist here, madam," said he,

in as low a voice as ever, but with authority which subdued even her. "And I must insist upon your making no further disturbance outside my patient's door. Otherwise I will not answer for the consequences."

Elizabeth could just see, behind the physician's figure, the bed with her brother sitting up in it, supported by pillows, and with Lindley by his side. She could see too that the writing-table which usually stood at the foot of the bed was now at the side of it, and that the inkstand was open. With the impulsive activity of a girl, she instantly attempted to pass Doctor Ledbury; but he put up an arm like iron to bar her entrance, and said, in a whisper that absolutely awed her by a resolution superior to her own—

"I must request you to retire."

She faltered, met his cruel eyes, and, struck by a sudden fear of him, stepped back. The door was instantly closed and locked.

Excited to something stronger than suspicion, she left the dressing-room, but remained in the corridor, listening, watching. And, after a long low murmur of voices in the sick-room,

Lindley came out, went to the head of the staircase, and, looking down into the dim hall below, tapped softly on the carved oak bannisters and beckoned. Johnson came up and was let into the room, the door of which had been locked the moment Mr. Fielding came out; then, before following the man-servant, Lindley turned towards the dark corner where his cousin had believed herself to be hidden.

"I am sorry to have to keep you in the dark, Elizabeth," said he, suavely; "but it won't be for very long now. Before this evening is over, I shall have finished the performance of a sacred duty, and justice will be satisfied."

"Not until you are in prison, Lindley, for your share in an infamous conspiracy," answered she, maddened by the only half-repressed triumph in his tone. "You shall not benefit by this day's work, if I have to beg for the means of bringing you to justice."

"It is not I, but others who will benefit by my exertions, Elizabeth," said he, with infuriating gentleness of remonstrance.

"She will not, believe me. You have heard of 'undue influence' perhaps?"

"Yes, I have heard of it, and more than that, I have seen it used for nineteen years to prevent Sir Charles from acknowledging his daughter, and even in attempting to dissuade him from educating her in a manner suitable to her station."

With this impressive tirade, Lindley tapped at the door, and was readmitted into the sick-room.

Elizabeth swept downstairs with head erect and flashing eyes and shut herself into the library. She had her brother's keys still in her possession; and, sitting down before the bureau, she unlocked it with unsteady fingers, and turned over the papers in passionate haste until she found those relating to her brother's adopted child and the extravagant expenses into which the support of her had led him. She read them over again with greedy eagerness; every item of expenditure seemed to eat into her brain. Between her clenched teeth she hissed out the sums he had paid to the Misses Gretton for her food, her education, her dress, even her pocket-money. Pocket-money! This greedy vagrant had had sixpence a week

to waste before she was ten, while she and her sister had only been allowed half that sum when they were twelve. But the later details concerning Geraldine's school expenses and the amount allowed her for dress were more appalling still.

There was some excuse for the bitterness with which this lady, whose whole life had been one long struggle with the wants of a rich woman and the purse of a poor one, whom nature had made extravagant and circumstances mean, now found that, while she and her sister had been wearing old bonnets retrimmed and gowns made up by their own maid, this unacknowledged waif had been allowed a supply of hats and frocks quite liberal for a schoolgirl's wardrobe. She was naturally not inclined to admit that her brother had as much right to spend his money on the support of an abandoned child as some of his neighbours, little richer than he, had to keep yachts and hounds and to indulge in still more expensive pleasures. She was even less ready to allow that it was a harmless and a generous whim. She could see nothing in the act of adopting

the child, with its concomitant cares and expenses, but a long tale of treachery and extravagence; nothing in the papers before her but the records of a crime; nothing in the girl herself but a dangerous, a fatal enemy to be encountered, defeated, and crushed. Lindley's ingeniously forsaken child to be installed as mistress at Waringham, as Lindley himself was contriving at this moment! If Doctor Ledbury were twenty physicians to testify to Sir Charles's soundness of mind when making his will—she knew what was the business going on upstairs—she would find means of fighting Lindley, of breaking down his story, falsehood by falsehood, and of proving that her brother had never been married.

Only a momentary doubt on this last point troubled her, though the papers now before her showed that he could be more reserved than she had believed; but she had stronger reasons than his own word for her reliance on the fact that he had always been a bachelor. Although he had been stationed with his regiment abroad, as well as in different parts of Britain, he had never been out of family surveillance, through

the fact that his Colonel was an old friend and correspondent of the late Sir James, his father. The possibility that the girl might still be her brother's child she admitted; but she had little to fear except from the establishment of the girl's legitimacy.

She was still poring over the evidences of her brother's treachery and deceit when a ring at the front-door bell made her start nervously. It seemed to her that it was some time before she heard Johnson's step returning from the front-door, and Johnson's voice saying, in a tone full of sympathy and respect—

"Will you come in here, ma'am—into Sir Charles's study? Miss Eleanor, one of Sir Charles's sisters, ma'am, is in the drawing-room."

He turned the study door handle; but the door was locked.

A harsh voice said slowly from within the room—

"What is it?"

"A young lady wishes to speak to you, ma'am, upon something very important."

"Show the young lady into the drawing-room."

Geraldine shrank back at the sound of the voice, and the servant whispered respectfully—

"Won't you go back, ma'am? Indeed, it is of no use. You had better not see her; poor Sir Charles would not wish it."

For Johnson knew Miss Geraldine, and knew her history too.

But the girl, whose face was white with grief, while her eyelids were heavy with crying, answered falteringly—

"I must, I must, Johnson! It is my only chance, you know;" and the young voice quavered on the last words.

Very reluctantly he led the girl through the dark halls, where the shadows of huge antlers on the walls flickered grimly in the dim lamplight, and dusty old portraits looked down solemnly upon her out of their heavy frames, to the drawing-room.

And, as he ushered her into the long cold apartment, where one lamp at the other end made a little circle of light in the vault-like darkness, the sound of an old woman's sobbing was the greeting which met her ears.

CHAPTER VIII.

When the Vicar of Waringham left the Hall, after his visit to Sir Charles and his futile endeavour to induce Miss Elizabeth Otway to accede to her dying brother's wishes, he walked through the park and along the meadow-path which led to the Vicarage, a good deal disturbed in mind. Lindley Fielding had, indeed, as his cousin Elizabeth had guessed, suggested in his note to Mr. Bamber certain questions concerning the young lady under Miss Gretton's care; and the signs and efforts to speak which Sir Charles had made in answer let in a flood of light on to the position of the girl and the baronet's wishes with regard to her. He was very shy of interference in his capacity of spiritual adviser; but when the temporal interests of an amiable, accomplished,

bright-faced girl were involved, the Vicar felt uneasy as to whether, as a neighbour as well as a Christian, some action other than a prayer for Sir Charles's spiritual welfare were not required of him.

At the door of his home he met his son Reginald, just returned from a drive into Goldborough in the Vicar's Norfolk cart.

"Hallo! Is it true you have been to the Hall, father? Did you see Sir Charles?"

"Yes. Come into the study a moment; I want to speak to you."

The Vicar had great respect for the judgment of his son, who was a tall, dark, handsome man, with so much natural dignity of manner that his very silence was impressive, even when it arose from the fact of his having nothing to say, while the grave and courteous attention which he always gave to any matter upon which his opinion was asked added to his decision double value.

"There is a very mysterious state of things up at the Hall now," rattled out the Vicar, solemnly. He had entirely lost his voice a couple of years ago, and had since been com-

pelled to give up all share in the services of his little church.

"Indeed!" said Reginald.

"Yes, very mysterious. Nobody seems to know who is who. Lindley Fielding, that good-for-nothing cousin of theirs they had always such a difficulty in getting rid of, has installed himself there as friend of the family; Elizabeth Otway evidently considers him nothing of the kind. He and Sir Charles both seem to agree that the pretty, good little Miss Geraldine Lindley is Sir Charles's legitimate daughter, while Elizabeth——"

"His legitimate daughter!" broke in Reginald. "Then, why hasn't he acknowledged her before?"

"That is the mystery. He said he didn't know it and referred me to Lindley. But then Lindley is such a liar——"

"But, for the girl's sake, it is most important that this should be cleared up. Where is Lindley? At the Hall still?" asked Reginald, his tone deepening to a grave interest, which was the nearest approach to violent excitement he usually showed.

"Yes; but wait a minute. There is something I want to ask you. Sir Charles wishes to see the girl; Elizabeth won't let her be sent for. But it seems to me that, in such a case as this, if a sick man's relatives don't do their duty, his friends ought to step in and do it for them. You know how I hate interfering, and it would be as useful to preach Christian charity to the chairs as to Elizabeth Otway; but, at the same time——"

"I'll go over to Copsley myself at once and fetch her," said Reginald, really excited now. "Bob can't have been unharnessed yet. Whether she is his daughter or not, we know he is devotedly fond of her, and his dying wish ought to be respected."

"But think what we are doing, Reginald. Through his unfortunate reticence, the girl herself doesn't know who she is, or anything about the household at the Hall. Elizabeth is not likely to receive her kindly, and shock after shock will come upon the poor child at once."

"They have begun to come already, father; the sooner she knows the worst the better for

her. Lindley Fielding himself began the work yesterday; I found Miss Lindley in tears and great distress after a conversation with him. I told her to console her that I knew him to be an unscrupulous liar; but it is possible he may have found some scrap of truth to serve his purpose this time. However, whatever he told her, it was something which distressed her very much."

"It would naturally, coming upon her so unexpectedly. But, remembering the signs Sir Charles made to me yesterday when I talked to him upon this very subject, I cannot help thinking Lindley's assertion may possibly be true. So I think there can be no harm in fetching her, and she can spend the night here if necessary. Tell Miss Gretton so, and I will speak to your mother about it."

And, delighted to be relieved of the active part of the affair, the Vicar hurried his son off, and returned to the meditations in the study which occupied the greater part of his time.

Reginald Bamber drove fast along the road to Copsley. His father's words had suggested a possibility which would be the realization of

the wish which was nearest to his heart at the present time. If Geraldine Lindley—pretty, bright, graceful, highly cultivated Miss Lindley —were really Geraldine Otway, then there could not be in the whole world a more ideally perfect woman for him to wed and to carry back with him in triumph to New York, as a living, charming proof to his American friends of the assertion he had always maintained that, for beauty without artifice, grace without coquetry, and intelligence without self-assertion, English girls of the higher classes were without rivals. It was due to his self-esteem that he should present to those friends some such vindication of his rather marked indifference to the beauties of their fellow-countrywomen. Reginald resolved that he would not unnecessarily alarm Miss Lindley by informing her at once of the serious nature of Sir Charles's illness ; he would merely state that the baronet had sent for her, and would then, as he drove her to Waringham, do his best to advance his own claims to her notice and secure a firm place in her remembrance.

On arriving at Heathcote House, however,

he learnt that Miss Lindley was out; so, saying that he would call again, and hearing that she had gone towards the moor, a desolate outlying part of the parish where some of the very poorest of the cottagers lived, he drove in that direction, in the hope of meeting her.

But Geraldine was in the mean time returning homewards by a footpath across the meadows, walking very fast, lest dusk should come on and her nervous guardian be angry at her delay. She reached the house soon after Reginald Bamber left it. Miss Gretton called her at once into the drawing-room. Geraldine thought she was to be catechized as to whether she had committed the grave risk and impropriety of crossing the fields alone so late in the afternoon, and prepared a penitential face like a child. She had been kept curiously young for her age in many ways by the fussy dictatorship of her old maiden guardian, and one of the signs of this was the juvenile submission she showed to her irritating little ordinances, like a model child, and the crestfallen humility she showed when she had disregarded one of them. But Miss Gretton, with

the slow steps to which her active frame was now condemned, led her into the lamplight and looked down over her spectacles, as was her manner, into the girl's bright young face and candid eyes.

"Some one has been here asking to see you," began the old lady, rather severely. Not that she disapproved of Reginald Bamber, whom she, on the contrary, considered to be the ideal of manly perfection; but the undying instinct of the schoolmistress that admiration and admirers were things to be kept out of the heads of young people unconsciously influenced her tone.

"My guardian!" cried Geraldine, her face alight with pleasure in a moment.

"No; not Sir Charles—a young gentleman."

Geraldine grew anxious, and her face fell. Was it the stranger with two names, whose cruel revelations and suggestions had tormented her since yesterday?

Miss Gretton watched the young face curiously.

"It is Mr. Reginald Bamber," said she.

Geraldine blushed, as an inexperienced girl always does under an examination of this kind,

whether her heart is interested in the subject of it or not. But to Miss Gretton's watchful eyes this blush pleaded "Guilty," and she instinctively continued, in a more severe tone than before—

"He is going to call again."

"Indeed, Miss Gretton! What does he want? Did you see him?"

"No; he asked after me, but would not disturb me, as he knows the afternoon is the time I devote to—letter-writing," said the old lady, with an irresistible twinkle in her eyes.

"So he is going to call again when he thinks you have finished—writing your letters?" said Geraldine, too innocently.

"Geraldine"—more sharply than ever—"it is you, and not I, Mr. Bamber is coming to see!"

"Well, Miss Gretton?" She was now quite audaciously indifferent.

"Well, my dear," answered the old lady, brought to the point, and relapsing into friendliness—"well, do you like him?"

"Oh yes, he is very nice!"

"Very nice! You need not speak of him in

that patronizing tone, as if there were a hundred gentlemen about whom you liked just as well."

"Well, so there are. At least—no, not a hundred; but there are a few. There is—there—let me see—there is Mr. Meadows!"

"Mr. Meadows! Why, Mr. Meadows is a married man! You cannot admire Mr. Meadows?"

"Oh, you didn't say 'admire!' No; he is not so good-looking as Mr. Bamber."

"Now, Geraldine, this is affectation! You know very well that there is not in the whole county a man so handsome, so well-bred, or so highly cultivated as Mr. Bamber!"

"You admire him more than I do, Miss Gretton."

"You don't deserve him. I have a great mind to cut you out."

"You are quite welcome to do so, as far as I am concerned," said Geraldine, with ever-increasing indifference, which was rather exaggerated.

"Ah, you wouldn't be quite so generous if I were half a century or so younger—would you?"

Geraldine laughed, and laid her head affectionately on the old lady's shoulder.

"Not quite, perhaps. But really I should care less than you think."

"Would you? You seemed very much excited yesterday when you came in and confessed to having met Mr. Bamber in the churchyard."

"Oh yes; but—but he had not been—been——"

"Making love to you?"

"No, not at all."

"Well, it won't be long before he does, I fancy; but I must confess that I don't think you could easily have made a better choice, my dear."

"But I haven't chosen him. You are so impetuous, Miss Gretton; you can't call it 'choosing' to take the only man who wants you, for one thing; and I am not at all sure that he does not want me, for another; and I am still less sure that I want him."

"Why, what does the girl want? Do you expect a prince to marry you?"

"No; but—— Well, you know, it is a thing

one can't talk about, it sounds so absurd, and you would say I had been reading novels and had picked up silly ideas. But I do think one ought to—well, one ought to feel something—I don't know exactly what, but something different from — from anything else in fact—for the man one—well, one wants to marry."

"Rubbish, my dear! That is the very mistake all young girls make. They think they want an idol, when all they want is a husband. My advice to every young girl is this: when a well-born, well-bred, honourable gentleman, good-looking enough not to frighten you, and well-read enough to be a companion to you, asks you to be his wife—take him, and thank Heaven for your good fortune."

"Then, why didn't you give me this advice before, Miss Gretton, find out my ideas upon the subject, and try to change them into yours, instead of waiting until—until mine have grown so strong that—that I think it would be very difficult to change them, even if you were to persuade me that they were silly—as perhaps they are," she added, only half-lightly.

"Geraldine," said Miss Gretton, looking

affectionately and solemnly into the girl's face, "There may be some truth in what you say; the imagination of a young girl is a difficult thing to deal with, and perhaps we shirk the control of it too much. But don't let it run away with you, my dear; believe me, you will find it difficult for your imagination to picture to you a man more worthy of your love than Reginald Bamber; besides, he is handsome too, as very few good men are, I assure you. What fault can you possibly find in him?"

"Well, he is rather too perfect; he frightens me, and—and chills me a little. If I were to marry him, life would be one long fatiguing effort to live up to a standard above me."

"But, my dear child, what could be more blameless than your life? And surely your life is not a long fatiguing effort now?"

The girl kept her eyes down; so the eloquent flash in them which would have given her old instructress an unexpected and most appalling answer was unseen.

"No, no, of course not," she answered, laughing constrainedly; "but, if I were married, I

think I should like to be able to tell my husband my thoughts—say them right out at once without thinking first, you know. Well, I should never dare to tell half my thoughts to a man like Mr. Bamber; I should have a feeling that every—every unorthodox suggestion would jar upon him, and—and put the wheels out of order. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Well, I understand; but I think you are mistaken. A man like that, a superior man, a man of judgment and sense, would have more consideration than you think. And he would listen to you quite quietly, and make allowance—loving allowance for your errors, and put you gently right where you were wrong."

"That is just what I am afraid of!" burst out Geraldine, with vehemence which startled Miss Gretton, who, having hitherto treated the subject of the affections with her charge only in an abstract and Dry-as-dust sort of way, was not prepared for the intensity of the interest the girl showed in the matter when it was treated of more personally. "I don't want a superior being who will stand over me through life with a benignantly superior smile, and

indulgently listen to my hasty opinions and considerately point out my faults and mistakes to me. I am not a child now, to be handed over without having a voice in the matter from one trustworthy guardian to another. I am twenty-two; I have been a woman longer than you seem to think; I do know my own mind in this matter, and I don't want some one to lecture me, but some one to love me, and I would rather have the love without the lectures. I am tired of being guided; I want to guide myself."

"But, my child, my child, it is woman's lot and woman's blessing to be guided and guarded through life. A woman is not fitted for rough struggling with fortune, and, believe me, life is a very sad thing for a girl, brought up as you have been, when she is cast upon the world to make a way for herself as best she can."

Miss Gretton spoke very solemnly. Warned by Sir Charles, she had never before spoken to Geraldine of the possibility of her having some day to earn her own living; but now the girl's own words opened her mouth.

"But it hasn't been your lot to be guided,

Miss Gretton, and I'm sure it would not have been a blessing to you."

Geraldine said this rather archly, for it was undeniable. The old lady was obliged to smile.

"I was always plain, my dear; and that, whatever we may say to very young girls on the subject, makes all the difference in the world in a woman's life. It decreases its dangers, perhaps, but it certainly gives it in an altogether different course. I used once to think of the education of the young as a possible career for you; but I must acknowledge, my dear, that for some years at least you will find grave difficulties in the way, even if Sir Charles would agree to it; and he would certainly not do so. Indeed, if your guardian's wishes have any weight with you—and I know they have—I can assure you that nothing would give him so much pleasure as to know that your future was in such safe hands as those of Reginald Bamber."

"There it is again! Safe hands—I don't want to be in safe hands. Oh, Miss Gretton, do you know that I often feel like a wild bird

caught and imprisoned? I feel such a mad longing sometimes to break away from this house, from Copsley, even from you and my guardian—just for a little while, only a little while, to go among crowds and bustle and noise and—and dangers. You see you have taught me and counselled me and warned me, and filled me with knowledge and with precepts, and prepared me to meet every danger, moral and physical, which could possibly come upon me; and it is all thrown away, because I never meet any. And it seems such a pity—doesn't it?"

Miss Gretton did not attempt to check her, but listened with an earnest attention which encouraged the girl to pour out her whole heart. But the old lady was struck with apprehension on finding the wild nature of the vagrant—so it seemed to her—just as strong as ever, after nineteen years of careful cultivation—under the manner and form of the accomplished, graceful lady. Geraldine continued more and more impetuously—

"I don't know whether other girls feel as I do--I don't think they can, or the world would

be full of runaways; for they haven't all the ties of love and kindness which keep me still quietly here. I want something to do, something to spend my energies upon, something to tire me. If I could only go to balls like other girls, and dance till my feet ached! I do dance like that by myself sometimes—in the room where the birds are. I feel a wild craving—not for excitement, for I get into such a fever with that by myself that very often I can't sleep or keep still, but for something for my excitement to feed upon, some work, some action. Do you understand me? Why, I have frightened you; your dear old hands are trembling! Don't mind what I've said; oh, I'm so sorry, so sorry! I don't mean it all; I have only been teasing you. Forgive me, do forgive me, there's a kind old darling!"

But her caresses could not comfort Miss Gretton, who had heard in the girl's passionate tones and read in her flashing brown eyes warnings of future danger for her headstrong nature, against which all the mild precepts and daily texts with which she had been sedulously furnished would prove but a weak shield.

Almost for the first time, Miss Gretton got an insight into what that inner life was which the girl's natural reserve had kept concealed all these years. That spiritual life, the absence of which both the elderly ladies had deplored in their otherwise blameless charge, was replaced by a feverish energy of imagination, more earthly, more dangerous. She had nothing ready to say to the girl impressive enough to suit the needs of the occasion ; so she received her kisses and her retractations almost in silence, resolved to appeal for advice to the Vicar of Copsley, the Reverend William Cox, a kind old gentleman who was reported to be able to tell the exact number of words in any given chapter of the Bible. Geraldine was surprised by the mildness with which her outbreak had been received by her old instructress, who had often treated less serious ones more severely; but Miss Gretton felt that the case was too grave for scolding, or even for reproach, and she was glad when the announcement of "Mr. Reginald Bamber" allowed her to shelve the subject for further consideration when she should be alone.

Reginald broached the object of his visit very cautiously, to avoid alarming either of the ladies. It was not until after a little talk about the surprising coldness of the weather for the last two days, and everybody's hopes that the late frost would not injure the budding trees, that he mentioned that Sir Charles did not feel well enough to leave the house, and that, as he wished to see his ward, Reginald himself had offered to drive her to Waringham, and had come to beg Miss Gretton to trust her to his care. This announcement caused both ladies much agitation; the old lady guessed at once that nothing but severe illness would have led Sir Charles to take this step; the young one felt that the moment had come when all the mystery about herself would be cleared away. Reginald asked Miss Gretton, in his mother's name, to allow Geraldine to stay at the Vicarage until next day, when he promised to bring her back safely to Copsley. The girl had left the room to prepare for the drive, and the old lady took the opportunity of asking whether Sir Charles's illness was not more serious than he had admitted.

"Yes, I am afraid so," he gravely answered,

"Poor Geraldine!" murmured the old lady, not without a shrewd intention of drawing forth a reassuring answer. She succeeded.

"I don't think you need alarm yourself about the future of—of Miss Lindley," said he gently, looking gravely at his hat. "From what I have heard, I believe she will be—er—provided for."

And, leaving her in the dark as to whether he himself or Sir Charles would be Geraldine's good providence, he rose as the young girl re-entered the room. She was much excited, and the additional brightness and colour which impatience and anxiety gave to her face made her so lovely in his eyes that he felt tempted to make the plunge on his way with her to Waringham, instead of prudently waiting to see whether Sir Charles really would acknowledge her as his daughter. Fortunately, the girl herself saved him from such a rash act. This, her first visit to her guardian's home for nineteen years, was an occasion full of solemn interest, of eager yet timid anticipation to her, little as she guessed how deeply her fortunes

were involved in it. There were several things she must find out first.

"Is it far?" she asked timidly, when they were well on their way, the Vicar's cob trotting fast along the hard roads, between the budding hedges, whose scanty covering of pale leaf and white blossom could no longer be distinguished in the gathering dusk of the April afternoon.

"To Waringham? No, not far; we shall be there very soon. Are you tired of—of the drive already?"

His voice was naturally so sweet that even this speech sounded like an avowal of love. But Geraldine's mind was far too much absorbed in Waringham Hall and its master to notice this.

"Oh, no, not tired, not tired at all! But I —I have never been to Waringham; at least I—I think not."

"You think not?"

"Yes. I should have said the day before yesterday I was sure not; but since then I have heard some things which have set me thinking, and I have been trying to remember as far back as I can and—— Is there the skin of some

animal, lion, tiger—I don't know what—on the floor of one of the rooms?"

"There is a lion's skin with the head on in Sir Charles's library, I believe."

"And is there at Waringham Hall a woman, a lady—I don't know who—with a very disagreeable, repellant face?" she asked hesitatingly.

"Oh, yes—several!"

"Several?" echoed poor Geraldine.

"Why, yes; I think you must prepare yourself for a remarkable absence of feminine charm in every member of your sex whom you will meet there! Tom and Percy, my brothers at Shrewsbury, call the Hall the 'Witches' Cavern'!"

"Oh, not really! And my poor guardian lives there! How many w—witches are there?"

"Well, there are his two sisters——"

"Two sisters!" faltered Geraldine. Another of the stranger's statements was true, then.

"Yes; I think they are the worst; but some people think even they are less alarming than the housekeeper, Mrs. Symes. Fortunately, the

rest of the women-servants, of whom one hears dreadful accounts, are seldom seen by visitors."

"It doesn't sound like a very cheerful place," said Geraldine, doubtfully.

"It is quite an enchanted castle of horrors, to my mind; so I warn you to be stout-hearted, Miss Lindley. Its very aspect as we drive up to it will depress you, and it has an atmosphere of gloom and decay in which you will need all your fortitude, especially at such a time as this."

Geraldine was silent; it began to dawn upon her that she would find her guardian very ill—far worse than she had expected. At last, after trying to speak once or twice, she found voice to say, almost in a whisper—

"Mr. Bamber, you would not deceive me about this, would you? It would be too—terrible! He is—not—dead?"

"No, no," said Reginald, very gently. "Don't be alarmed; he is very ill; but he is alive, and very, very anxious to see you."

The girl drew a convulsive, sobbing breath.

"Drive fast, fast, please," she whispered.

And he touched the cob with the whip as he looked down reverently at the young face

beside him, which wore an expression of intense agony that would have softened a heart of stone. After a short silence, she said, in a low voice—

"They are kind to him—his sisters—now?"

"I suppose they are, in their fashion." She shivered. He continued, reassuringly, "Sir Charles is used to them, and he would not expect more tenderness from them than they can give."

"How can they help being tender to him—his own sisters too! They can't be human!"

"Yes, they are human, though perhaps they don't belong to the best type of humanity. One must make allowances for them; they are old and poor and rather selfish, and they depend entirely on their brother, I believe; so, if you find them rather hard and disagreeable, you must not mind, you know."

"I don't mind what they are like to me—at least, yes I do," said she, with a sudden change to nervous fear; "I hope they won't say anything unkind to me," she faltered.

"How could they?" exclaimed Reginald. Then he quickly added, "What could they say?"

"I—don't—know; perhaps they are angry with my guardian for being so fond of me. You see he has been just like a father to me; I could not love him a bit better if he were my father," she declared, her voice breaking.

Reginald was silent. It was clear that she herself had not the least idea of there being any relationship between her and her guardian. Ought he to prepare her? One thing at least she must learn.

"You remember the gentleman who spoke to you in the churchyard yesterday?" he asked presently. "He is a cousin of Sir Charles"—she started—"and I expect you will find him at the Hall."

Geraldine uttered a faint cry. The whole aspect of her visit to Waringham was suddenly changed to her; it had become shadowed with unknown terrors.

"Oh, Mr. Bamber, do you know anything? Can you tell me anything? I am walking so blindly; and to have to meet that man, whom I fear and almost hate—already frightens me!"

"I know nothing," he replied; "but you may learn something to-night, not from Lindley

Fielding—who, by-the-by, was the cause of Sir Charles's illness—but from your guardian himself."

The park gates were now in sight; Reginald pointed to the lodge.

"That is the Hall," he said in a low voice.

A man was standing by the gates; but he slunk away as the little cart drove quickly up.

"Just the same, sir, by the last accounts," said the lodge-keeper, in answer to Reginald's inquiry, as he opened the gates.

And they drove on fast towards the house, which, standing square and gray in the evening mist, with only one dim light here and there showing faintly and flickeringly through the blinds, made an impression even stronger than Reginald had predicted on the trembling girl.

"Keep up your courage!" whispered he, as, after ringing the bell, he helped her down from the cart. "Ask boldly to see Sir Charles. Don't, if you can help it, see any one else first. You know Johnson, Sir Charles's old servant, don't you?"

"Oh yes!"

Johnson had often brought messages and

fruit and flowers to the ladies at Heathcote House, having been selected for that, in addition to his many other duties, as a special mark of his master's favour. So that, when he opened the door, Geraldine thankfully greeted him as a friend in this gloom-haunted house, whose sepulchral aspect had already added terror to the grief in her heart. But even Johnson caused her another alarm, for he started at sight of her, and whispered—

"You, Miss Geraldine!" in a tone which caused her for a moment to lose the power of speech.

"Take this young lady to Sir Charles; don't let any one frighten her," said Reginald's soft measured tone. Then he took her hand and pressed it reassuringly. "I will come back for you in an hour or two," said he, kindly, "and take you to my mother. Miss Lindley will pass the night at the Vicarage, Johnson," he added to the old butler, with a last injunction—"Take care of her."

Geraldine made a gesture as if to call him back, as she saw him, her last friend of the living outside world, step into the little Norfolk

cart, raise his hat, and drive away, leaving her alone, stricken with a hundred fears, on the threshold of this house which she had so longed to see, which now seemed to her to be haunted with terrors worse than death. For she could not realize that she would find her guardian, the gentle, smiling guardian he had always been to her—here.

"I want to see him, Johnson; will you take me to him?" she asked like a child. "He has sent for me."

"I can't, Miss Geraldine; there's a strange doctor, a great doctor from London with him, and Mr. Fielding his cousin; they won't let anybody into Sir Charles's room."

"Oh, but they will let me see him, I think; tell him I'm here! Can't you tell him, Johnson? Oh, do, do, please! I know you can; he is so fond of you."

"Indeed I can't, Miss Geraldine. You know well enough I'd help you if I could."

"But I must see him: if you won't take me to him, I'll hunt about for his room by myself. Oh, you must know he wants to see me!"

"Indeed, I know that well enough; but I don't see—— Well, I'll try."

Geraldine had advanced from the cold stone-paved entrance-hall to the first of the inner halls, which was scarcely warmer, scarcely lighter. A bold idea had crossed her mind; there was nothing for it but boldness now.

"Where are Sir Charles's sisters, Johnson?" she asked, as a boy asks for the master who has promised to cane him.

"Oh, Miss Geraldine, you can't see them!" cried the butler, in alarm.

"I must, I must; which must I see?"

"Oh, it will be Miss Elizabeth; but don't, I beg of you, Miss Geraldine. I believe she —she'll eat you!" said he, encouragingly.

"I can't help that; I must see her."

Johnson reluctantly advanced to the study door, which he found locked; and Miss Elizabeth's own hard voice told him to "show the young lady into the drawing-room."

Trembling from head to foot, but strung up by the need of all her courage, of all her untried eloquence in this dreaded meeting, Geraldine followed Johnson through the creaking door into the gloomy chilling vastness of the drawing-room.

CHAPTER IX.

As the sound of low sobs met her ear, before she could see any human being besides herself in the room, Geraldine was seized with a childish impulse to open the door and run away again; and as, conquering this feeling, she advanced into the second and larger room, and a little lean old woman, with bead-like black eyes and a bent shrunken figure, sprang up from the sofa by the fireplace and peered at her from behind the lamp on the table, the girl shuddered with an eerie superstitious feeling that she was really under the influence of some evil enchantment. For no hag versed in witch-craft ever looked more weirdly uncanny than poor harmless Miss Eleanor, as she took up her silver-headed crutch with its tapering stick, and moved feebly forward a few paces, her

furrowed, leather-coloured face still further disfigured by weeping, blinking anxiously in the lamplight in her endeavour to make out the features of the intruder. Involuntarily Geraldine made a step back.

"Who is it?" asked a thin querulous voice.

The sound was human at least; and detecting in the sharp nervous tone the reassuring fact that the witch was afraid of her, Geraldine recovered her self-possession, and said gently—

"I am afraid I have disturbed you; I am very sorry. My name is Geraldine Lindley."

The decrepit old lady gave a gasp of horror. She had come close to the girl by this time, and she now put her little thin claw-like hand upon Geraldine's arm and looked up into the fair young face with a nervous devouring scrutiny in which, however, there was no conscious unkindness. The girl felt this, and smiled as she bent her head towards the ugly, anxious, withered features, which had already lost their terrors.

"It is a good face!" said the old lady at last, betraying ingenuously some surprise. She had never seen the baby-waif since the day the

latter left the Hall till this the day of her return; and her imagination had followed her sister's representations so dutifully that she had unconsciously expected to see greed and avarice and every selfish vice stamped on the features of this hungry vampire who was living on the very life-blood of the Otways. And to find that the vampire bore the likeness of a beautiful girl of good and gentle manners gave Miss Eleanor a shock, whether of pain or of pleasure she hardly knew.

"Oh, Miss Otway, do let me see Sir Charles! I am so fond of him—you don't know how fond of him! Do please let me see him!"

"My dear, it is of no use to ask me; you must ask my sister Elizabeth. And I am afraid it will be of no use to ask her either. She—er—she—— Oh, dear, I wish she would come! She sees to everything; I am an invalid. But I think, if I were you, my dear, I would not ask her. And yet I don't know," she added doubtfully, looking up again into the face which was gaining upon her heart more and more, and wondering for one brief moment

whether the sight of this ray of youth and loveliness might not soften Elizabeth too. But her common sense returned in an instant; and she said, plucking at the girl's sleeve with disconcerting nervousness, and dropping her voice to a croaking half-whisper, "My dear, who told you to come? It is a pity you have come; it is, indeed! It is not that I wish to be unkind to you, my dear; in other circumstances I am sure I should have liked you very much; but you see it is rather awkward for everybody—isn't it? And Elizabeth, my sister, is very—very just, and she has a way of saying what she thinks in a very straightforward manner, which, perhaps, might—er—might disconcert you a little, my dear."

"Oh no; straightforwardness would not disconcert me; I would rather deal with straightforward people! But is Miss Elizabeth Otway so very formidable, then?"

"Oh no, not formidable at all, my dear, but very—very undemonstrative, except—except when she is annoyed—at least, not annoyed, but—— I am afraid I am giving a wrong impression of her, and perhaps——"

"Perhaps I shall like her very much, after all," said Geraldine, encouraged by her interview with the witch.

"Perhaps!" echoed Eleanor, faintly. For it seemed very unlikely that the doomed intruder would succeed in doing what nobody had ever done yet.

Geraldine was more puzzled than ever, on finding what a very harmless bogey the first of the witches really was, as to her guardian's reason for keeping the very existence of his sisters concealed from her. The dread of some terrible secret to be disclosed to her in this dreary house on this anxious night began to grow upon her again; and, when the creaking of the door at last announced the approach of the all-important Miss Elizabeth, the girl turned with a deep sigh of relief towards her.

But the very first sight of the stiffly upright figure, majestic though not tall, in an old gray silk gown that hung in soft folds about her, and of the hard face and the cold eyes, struck Geraldine with superstitious indefinable terror, for she recognized the face which had once

frightened her in her childhood; and she knew now that she had been in Waringham Hall before. As the rigid figure approached, she bowed, but for a moment dared not advance. When within a few steps of her, Elizabeth stopped and looked at her from head to foot. There was something in this cold, contemptuous, deliberate inspection so cruelly different from the timid inquiring scrutiny to which the other sister had subjected her, that Geraldine, alarmed and wounded, shrank back and hesitated, not knowing what to say. However, as the other maintained her cold silence, the girl began, in a low, faltering voice—

"I have dared, Miss Otway——"

"Dared? Yes, that is the right word. You have dared a great deal, Miss Lindley."

But the girl, knowing herself to be innocent of intentional wrong, raised her brown eyes to meet the cold blue ones very steadily; and, recovering her self-possession to hear and answer whatever accusation might be coming, she said, in a firmer tone—

"You cannot know, Miss Otway, that Sir Charles sent for me."

"Indeed! Whom did he send?"

"Mr. Reginald Bamber."

"Who was also good enough to bring you, I suppose?"

"Yes, he drove me here."

"And is he going to drive you back?"

"I—I don't know."

"Oh, then the duty of seeing you safely restored to your friends is entrusted to us? Or is it your intention to honour us permanently with your presence?"

"Elizabeth! Elizabeth!" expostulated Eleanor, moved out of her tacit submission by this coarse cruelty and by the stony expression of her sister's face, which told that she had worse blows still to deal before long. The rigid gray figure merely silenced the feeble protest by an imperative gesture.

"I don't understand you," said Geraldine, in a low voice.

"I will try to speak more clearly. Since you are so abnormally innocent, it devolves upon me to tell you that your presence in this house is an insult to us, Sir Charles's sisters, who for years have been silent sufferers from the

unreasonable fancy he took, nineteen years ago, to the abandoned child of a beggar woman."

Eleanor sat crouched on the sofa, shuddering. But the girl to whom this revelation was thus coarsely made heard it in perfectly calm silence, without a start or a sound. It was too new, too sudden, too entirely unexpected for her to be able at once to feel any sensation about it; she merely understood it, and waited for more.

Elizabeth continued — "I should have thought that, having been brought up, thanks to the generosity with which Sir Charles starved and pinched his own relatives for your sake, in a manner far above your station, you would have had the decency to respect the feeling which prompted your benefactor to forbid you this house."

"My guardian—Sir Charles—has never forbidden me this house, madam," said Geraldine, quietly; "and it was he who sent for me this evening. It is he I have come to see, and I have no wish to obtrude either upon you or Miss Eleanor Otway. If you will be kind

enough to let him know I am here, you will see I have told you the truth."

She turned, with a first restless movement, glancing with anxious eyes towards the bell. She was not only impatient to be with her old guardian, but a choking feeling in her throat warned her that, if she were to have to pass through a further ordeal of cold looks and cruel words, her self-command would be in danger.

But Elizabeth had other bolts in store, and she meant to use them all.

"Unfortunately it is impossible for me to fulfil your wishes," said she, with hard irony. "A physician from London is with him, and he cannot be disturbed."

"Then I will come back to see him presently," said Geraldine, speaking rather more quickly than before. "I will take care that you and Miss Eleanor Otway shall not again be disturbed by my arrival."

"I am afraid I must beg you not to run the risk of incurring another disappointment, Miss Lindley. In the critical state my brother, Sir Charles, is in now, the excitement of seeing any one but the members of his own family

might have dangerous results for him, and I regret to inform you that I therefore feel compelled to withhold my permission from your doing him the honour of a visit."

"But he wishes to see me," expostulated Geraldine, still very quietly, though her voice was not quite steady.

"Very likely. But his wishes, now that he is ill, must be controlled for his good by the common sense of those nearest and dearest to him."

"But there is no one nearer or dearer to him than I am," burst out Geraldine, not loudly, but with the fire of passionate earnestness in her voice. "You yourself have confessed that. For, if the story I never heard before, which you have just told me, is true, then surely the little outcast who had no claim upon him must be very, very dear for him to have made for her sake the sacrifices you speak of."

"You need not distress yourself about that, Miss Lindley. The sacrifices Sir Charles made on your account, by selling his farms and cutting down his timber, have affected chiefly

that part of his estate from which we, his sisters, would, in the case of his death, derive what scanty income we should have. But these details cannot interest you. So long as your own place in his will is secure, of course ours is a matter of no importance to you."

Geraldine caught an inspiration from these words.

"If that is what is troubling you, you need not be afraid of me," said she quickly. "Sir Charles has indeed, as you say, done more than enough for me." She was hurrying her words, lest the passion of remorseful gratitude which was surging up in her heart should overflow and render her incapable of thought or action. "Thanks to him, I have been well educated and am able to work. If he were to do anything more for me now that I know all I owe him"—her voice was shaking more and more —"it would not cause me happiness, but the deepest pain. Let me tell him that!" she almost sobbed.

"You are very good. But I cannot impose on your generosity so far. It seems inhospitable to suggest it; but I think your friends at

Copsley, as well as Sir Charles, would be much distressed if you were to delay your return any longer. It is getting late for a young lady to be out without an escort. I will order the carriage to take you back."

She moved towards the bell. There was a moment's pause before Geraldine dared trust herself to speak. Then she said—

"Thank you; but I will not trouble you to do that. I know Waringham Vicarage is close by; they are expecting me there."

Johnson was waiting at the other end of the room. Before Elizabeth could order the carriage, Geraldine had bowed to her, and had shaken hands with Eleanor, who, braving her sister's anger, crept up to the girl and pressed the warm firm hand in her skinny little fingers. Elizabeth was glad the girl had refused the offer of the carriage, as she grudged every moment's delay in getting her safely out of the house before Lindley or Sir Charles should learn her presence there. She had felt unutterably thankful for the self-control Geraldine had shown in keeping her voice too low for the sound of it to penetrate to the sick-

room above; she was thankful now for the girl's choice of going away on foot.

Geraldine left the room bravely, with firm step and erect carriage; but no sooner had the drawing-room door closed upon her than she turned to the old man-servant with glittering eyes and panting breath.

"Can't you take me to him now?" she whispered. "Oh, if he should die without my seeing him now—I—I think I should go mad! Oh, take me to him, take me to him, for Heaven's sake!"

The sound of a footstep at the other side of the drawing-room door suddenly froze the words on her lips, and, recalling her self-control, she crossed the hall towards the front door. There, after a cautious look into the darkness behind him, Johnson paused, with his hand upon the lock.

"I dare not go up now, Miss Geraldine. Mr. Fielding is up with Sir Charles and the doctor; and he has it all his own way about the place now. He is Sir Charles's cousin, ma'am—and if he was to say you couldn't come in, it would be all up with your chance

of seeing master. But, if you could manage to wait about, Miss Geraldine—it isn't a pleasant thing for a young lady to have to do, but it's your best chance—if you were to catch the doctor going out, and could persuade him to take you up to his room—why, you can wheedle a bird off a bough, Miss Geraldine, and you ought to be able to do it."

"Thank you, thank you, Johnson; I'll meet him, if I have to watch about all night; and I'll persuade him, if I have to beg him on my kness, to take me back."

The butler opened the door, and she went out into the darkness full of excitement and eager hope that this last chance of seeing her adored guardian that night might succeed. But as, walking with trembling steps over the gravel towards the front of the house, she heard the door close upon her, and realized that she was shut out from the house where the man who had been, to her, father and all the world besides lay, perhaps, dying at that moment, all her self-control suddenly gave way, and, returning, she flung herself down upon the doorstep and burst into sobs and

tears. The sense of the cruel words Elizabeth Otway had spoken to her had dawned upon her in all their terrible meaning now that she was alone. It was the generous charity of the man she had grown to love as if he had been her own father which had saved her in her childhood, cherished her during all these years, and supplied her every whim and fancy so munificently that the belief had insensibly grown up in her and in those about her that she was an heiress. She, the outcast child of a beggar-woman, a beggar and an outcast now again herself! It was this feeling which had prompted her to throw herself upon the doorstep of his home, the home from which they had shut her out, to sob her heart out, and to pray with all the fervour of her soul that she might see him once again—just once! He should not die until she had told him she knew everything, until she had sobbed out upon his breast some sort of incoherent, passionate thanks for all he had done for her. It would be too horrible; it could not be!

She sprang up and peered through the figured glass of the door panels into the entrance-

hall. All she could see of the lighted inner hall beyond was that there were figures moving in it; dreading lest one of these should be Miss Elizabeth Otway, she dared not ring yet. As she debated within herself what she should do, whether she should search round the house for another entrance, and trust to chance for reaching Sir Charles's room somehow, she heard footsteps on the gravel coming towards the entrance where she stood. Turning, she saw in the gloom the figure of a tall man close to the steps. Ashamed of having been caught in the act of peeping into the house, and rather alarmed by the manner in which the figure stopped short in front of her, as if to prevent her passing, she darted down the two wide stone steps past him. He turned at once and followed her. She recovered herself as a natural thought struck her, and, suddenly facing the figure, without, however, coming nearer, she asked—

"Is it you, Mr. Bamber?"

The figure approached her without answering, and, now really frightened, Geraldine hurried across the broad space of gravel which

stretched in front of the entrance, towards a dark mass of trees and shrubs opposite. As she ran in the darkness, which was now almost that of night—for it was nearly seven o'clock and the evening was dull and foggy—she was stopped abruptly by coming against a low iron railing; a bar rattled as she touched it, and, finding that her fingers were upon a gate, she felt for the latch, raised it, slipped through, and plunged into a clump of shrubs and evergreens on her right hand. She discovered that she was treading in the soft mould of a flower-bed, as she brushed past a yew tree and then paused close to a lilac bush, whose sweet half-open blossoms touched her cheek as she held her breath to listen. She could hear the man's footsteps still, though she could not see him—he had given up pursuit and was returning towards the house. Shame then seized her at her childish fright; no one of whom she need be afraid would be going boldly up to the house as this man was doing when she first saw him. She was not particularly timid by nature; but a certain vague dread of the stranger himself which she could not define had seized her just

at a time when she was still in a state of high nervous excitement.

She had just found her way slowly and sheepishly on to a narrow path that led from the little gate through which she had come to a similar one about a dozen yards farther on, when she heard the front door of the house open, and saw against the light in the hall behind him the figure of the butler standing in the doorway. He came out on to the steps and called softly, "Miss Geraldine!" Before she could rush forward at the welcome sound, he had come down the steps on to the drive; the next moment, with a hoarse cry of terror, he had fled back helter-skelter up the steps into the house, slamming the door behind him. She could see from where she now stood what it was that had caused his alarm—it was the tall figure, only just distinguishable in the gloom, which had started her upon her wild flight into the shrubbery. She crept up to the little gate through which she had come, and, leaning upon it, watched the mysterious stranger with straining eyes as he went up the steps and prosaically rang the bell.

At the moment when Geraldine had left the house, Lindley, whose important duties in the sick-room did not prevent his taking a watchful interest in what went on downstairs, had been coming from his cousin's bedside to find out the meaning of certain sounds which had reached his ears while imperative business, connected with papers which the baronet had desired to have read to him, had detained him with Sir Charles and Doctor Ledbury. He met Elizabeth at the foot of the staircase, on the way from the drawing-room to her own room.

"You have had a visitor, have you not?" he asked amiably.

"Yes," she answered. "Reginald Bamber came to inquire after Charles."

"Ah, yes, I saw the Vicar's little cart from the window! Mrs. Bamber came with him, did she not? I saw a lady's figure."

"I believe he did say she had come with him."

"Surely she stayed some time, did she not? I seemed to hear a lady's voice a minute ago."

"I don't know whose voice it can have been,

then," said Elizabeth indifferently, proceeding to pass him.

He had a suspicion of the truth; she could tell that from a light which suddenly came into his face. But he had to speak to her upon another matter.

"Are you going upstairs, Elizabeth? Charles, who is now perfectly conscious and able to make himself understood, thanks to the doctor I sent for, wants you and Eleanor to come to his room to hear an important declaration he has to make. And Johnson and Mrs. Symes are to be there also; it is a thing which cannot be too widely known." Lindley was speaking with studied calmness, but there was the ring of triumph in his voice, the light of success in his eyes. "He has been making his will; that was the business which obliged him to deny you admittance. But it is over now, and he is very anxious to see you."

This was too much for Elizabeth's self-control. She turned on him with fire.

"And you think the game is yours, Lindley? You think that, after having locked yourself up with a weak-minded dying man, and induced

him to listen to stories and sign papers prepared by you, in the presence of witnesses suborned to your interests, you can triumphantly flourish the results of your patience and industry in the faces of us, his nearest relatives, without our uttering a word of protest! Why, I can and I will call the whole household to witness the open manner in which you have set a cordon of your spies round my brother to prevent our approaching him. It will be the most flagrant case of undue influence ever brought before the Probate Court."

"The case never will be before the Probate Court, unless some accident has clouded that intellect which has so long been your own boast and your family's torment," said Lindley, with quiet insolence. "Look here," he added in a lower voice, as he took from his pocket a small bundle of papers and letters; and, selecting two small strips of paper from the rest, held them one by one before her at just sufficient distance for them to be legible to her in the lamplight, but out of reach of her unscrupulous fingers—"what do you say to that—and that?" he asked exultingly. "Will those proofs silence you?"

"Let me see; I can't see," said Elizabeth faintly, as she clutched the bannisters.

"You have seen quite enough, I think," he answered, as he watched the effect of his revelation.

"Those papers are forgeries," she declared, in a low voice, recovering herself at once.

"Are they? Well, we'll see!" he answered, as he carefully slipped them through the elastic band which held the whole packet of documents and put them carefully back into the breast-pocket of his coat.

"If Charles had still had an heir, if James, our unfortunate nephew, had not been dead to us, you would never have dared to concoct this infamous plot."

"You are mistaken altogether, my dear Elizabeth. If James, 'our unfortunate nephew,' as you euphemistically call him, had not rendered himself incapable of inheriting the property, I would show these papers to him, as I now show them to you, with just as much confidence in the fact that their evidence is irrefutable."

He called to Johnson, who appeared at that

moment on his way to the dining-room to make preparations for dinner.

"Run after Miss Geraldine—Lindley," said he, with a glance at his cousin and a significant pause before the surname. "Ask her to return with you here, and show her straight up to Sir Charles's room."

And, softly whistling, Lindley turned and went upstairs.

Johnson put down the plate-basket, and got to the front door with the alacrity of a lad, lest his mistress should countermand this order. But, for the time, Elizabeth's imperious promptness had left her; she followed the servant slowly into the outer hall, heard him call, "Miss Geraldine!"—heard him utter a cry, and, the moment after, saw him rush back, slam the front door, and stand white and trembling, with staring eyeballs and open mouth, before her.

"What is the matter?" she asked abruptly. "Have you seen a ghost?"

"Ye-es, ma'am."

"What ghost?"

The butler put his hand up to his damp forehead, and stared at his mistress as if to

assure himself that he was awake and sober. Then he tried to speak; but fright had parched his mouth, and at first he was inaudible. When he got back his voice he whispered huskily—

"Master James!"

Elizabeth started violently.

"Hush, man! Are you dreaming?" she said in a quick, low voice. "Don't you know——"

But she was interrupted by the ringing of the bell. Signing to Johnson, who still stood paralyzed by alarm, to open the door, she turned the handle of the library door with fingers which, in spite of her strong nerves, were clammy with excitement and indefinable dread.

And the unfortunate servant moved obediently towards the entrance-hall, with the leaden feet of a doomed man on his way to the scaffold.

CHAPTER X.

THE gloom of a starless and foggy night had already fallen over the Norfolk broads and marshes and settled thickly among the oak trees of Waringham Park, when the old butler, Johnson, in obedience to his mistress's order, slowly and tremblingly opened the front door of the Hall to give admittance to the figure which had frightened him so much.

But when, having opened the door very gradually, with his eyes carefully kept away from the dreaded object, he had recovered enough self-possession to turn his head and glance at the figure once more, his fingers slipped from the door handle as he examined the ghost from head to foot in the light of the lamp above, and assured himself that it was a living man who stood, in long rough black

ulster and round travelling-hat, on the threshold before him.

"Lord ha' mercy!" muttered the servant below his breath. "It is himself sure enough."

"Yes, it is himself, and a pretty welcome he is getting!" said James Otway, with some irritation. Then he stepped into the entrance-hall, handing his bag to the still trembling manservant, and continuing to grumble in a manly, pleasant, and rather musical voice. "First some peeping baggage of a girl runs away at sight of me as if I had the plague; then you, who are old enough to know better, I should think, howl and slam the door in my face as if I were a ghost. Don't stand there making faces at me; go and get me something to eat. How are you?" And his irritability having gradually given way, in the course of his speech, to amused friendliness, he ended by taking the butler's hand into his own, which, by-the-bye, was much larger and rougher than that of the servant, and giving it a hearty shake.

Johnson looked up at him, still in evident fear, and answered in a whisper—

"I'm nicely, thank you, sir. I hope you are in good health too, sir."

"Why, what's the matter with me? Do I look as if I were dying?" asked the young man, with a sudden return of irritability.

"No, sir—no. Quite the contrary. You're looking very well indeed, sir, considering——"

The cobwebs of fright and surprise had not quite cleared away yet from the old servant's brain, or he would have had more tact than to let slip that suggestive word—more tact than to break off in his speech, appalled at his own indiscretion. James Otway, who was unbuttoning his ulster, turned sharply.

"Considering what?"

But the frown on his face and the low growl in which he spoke did not encourage the servant to be eloquent. He tried respectfully to laugh it off with a short joyless chuckle as he said—

"Well—er—considering the long time you have been away from Waringham, sir."

"Oh, ah!" said James, abruptly. Then, after a pause, during which Johnson helped him off with his ulster and noticed that circum-

stances had led him to become less careful of his appearance than he used to be, he continued, "Let me see, it is six years since I was last in this old vault—isn't it?"

"Yes; it is six years come next June since you were last at the Hall, sir," answered Johnson, who, now that the first shock of his surprise was over, was becoming more and more curious as to the way in which Master James had "got off," and as to the effect his arrival would have on affairs in the household.

"And how have things been going on all this time? Much the same as ever, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, much the same as ever, until yesterday, when—when Sir Charles was taken very suddenly ill, as perhaps you may have heard, sir?" he said, inquiringly.

"Yes, I have heard all about it—only within the last half-hour, though, from the keeper at the lodge—new man—didn't know who I was, and I didn't tell him. I've grown modest now, and don't care for a boisterous welcome," he added, with a short, hard laugh.

"Yes, sir, of course—yes, sir," Johnson agreed, nervously.

"How is my uncle now?" asked James, gravely, but without any show of deep affliction. There had never been the slightest sympathy between Sir Charles and his nephew, and for the latter to pretend to feel great grief at his uncle's condition would have been, to the old servant who remembered his neglected boyhood, the most transparent hypocrisy.

"He was better when I saw him last, sir. He's had a great London doctor down to see him, that Mr. Fielding sent for; and this Doctor Ledbury has really brought him round quite wonderful, so that he can speak a little—not plain, but so as you can understand him. And he's been making his will, sir; but, now you've come, of course it will change all that."

"Oh no; his will won't make much difference to me!" said James, indifferently. "Who is this Mr. Fielding who seems to be such an important person here now? Down at the lodge I heard a great deal about him. Surely it isn't that cousin of my uncle's, Lindley Fielding, whom they never would see if they could help it?"

"The very same, sir," replied Johnson,

dropping his voice. "It was something he told Sir Charles that gave him a great shock that brought on this stroke, I believe. It was in the library that it happened, sir."

Johnson glanced at the library door, which was some distance from where they were standing; and he managed, by looking significantly in that direction and then at the young gentleman, to convey the information that some one there might overhear them.

"Is he in there, then?" murmured James.

Johnson shook his head, and formed with his lips the single word, "She!"

James had not been too long away to understand that. He raised his eyebrows, and muttered in provokingly audible tones—

"Skinning flints, as usual, I suppose? Where is my Aunt Eleanor?"

"Miss Eleanor is in the drawing-room, sir. Shall I announce you, sir?"

"No, no—not yet. Somehow I am not overwhelmed with eager joy at the prospect of beholding my affectionate relatives once more. I think you were about the only friend I had in the old days here, Johnson. You

used to tweak my ears, but you were not illiberal in the matter of tarts."

But his only friend had not shown great alacrity in welcoming him, nor did he now display any sentiment more tender than a wish to dispose in some way of this unexpected visitor before the latter should, in the hearing of the household bogey, Miss Elizabeth, make some compromising statement which would bring that lady's icy wrath swiftly and suddenly upon them both. An evil spirit of listless loitering had apparently got hold of this strangely altered Master James, however ; for he yawned and stretched himself and looked at one after another of the dusty old portraits, and grumbled at the bad light, and wanted to know why they didn't have gas, and behaved altogether in such an unconventional and disconcerting way for a man who, though not in the pleasantest of circumstances, was, after all, returning to the home of his childhood after an absence of many years, that the orthodox Johnson gradually stiffened into a rigid attitude of respectful disapproval as he watched him.

At last the young man suddenly turned round and blinked at the lamp in an odd manner that the butler, standing in a position of obsequious dignity, with his eyes upon the ground, did not notice.

"Ah, well, I suppose I must go in and see them!" he said, with a great burst of rather overpowering cheerfulness.

"I think you had better, sir," agreed Johnson, coldly; then, surprised into a little more intelligence by the impatient stamp of the foot with which the young gentleman turned from him again, he added in a more genial tone, "It is warmer in there, sir, and it will be more cheerful for you than——"

"Warm, cheerful!" interrupted James, hotly. "Yes, with the warmth and cheerfulness of the charnel-house! Do you think I expected a blaze of light in honour of my return in the windows of this place, which was a dungeon to me in my boyhood? Or that the sweet-natured guardians who snubbed and neglected me because I wasn't a pretty plaything would rush out to overwhelm me with welcoming caresses? No; I left them because a fight

with the world had more attractions than their love and sympathy could offer me. If my life is ruined, it is through their fault—yes, their fault—and—and I'm sure I don't know why I've come back," he added, falling suddenly from the full passionate tones in which, with his eyes upon the opposite wall, he had been speaking to himself, not to the butler, into the careless apathy of his former manner.

"I'm sure, sir, they will be very glad to see you," said Johnson, with more courtesy than confidence.

"Oh yes, Johnson, I'm sure they will!" echoed James, drily.

He stepped slowly towards the drawing-room door; but, turning again before he reached it, he asked, with his eyes on a trophy of a fox's pate and a couple of brushes over the entrance to the central hall:

"Well, aren't you surprised to see me? Don't you wonder how I got here?"

Failing a welcome, the man was hungry for mere curiosity as to the manner of his return.

But Johnson was much disconcerted by

these questions, which he considered in the worst possible taste, as putting a valued and confidential retainer into a state of great embarrassment for a suitable answer. He coughed, and touching the tips of his left-hand fingers lightly with those of his right suggested, in a low and deferential voice—

"Ticket-of-leave, sir?"

But the explosion this too candid inquiry produced sent him reeling back a step or two, still respectful, but naturally astonished and indignant. For James swung suddenly round with clenched fist and fury in his face, and hissed out at the bewildered manservant.

"Good Heavens! Hold your d——d tongue!"

For a moment Johnson obeyed. Then, his wounded dignity rising and re-asserting itself, he drew up his still soldier-like figure and said—

"I beg your pardon, sir; it was far from my intention to offend. I think—I think a joke, a pleasantry, sir, might be pardoned in such an old servant of the family as I am."

"A joke!" repeated James slowly, looking down curiously, and still with a frown on his

face, at the deeply injured butler. "So you have come out as a humorist since I've been away! Well, then, by Jove, I think your style of fun is admirably suited to your surroundings. You would make a mute split his sides, Johnson."

And he walked at last to the drawing-room door, opened it, and went in. Eleanor was lying, crumpled and dishevelled, on her sofa, feeling her own pulse and assuring herself that her sister's violence towards that pretty unfortunate *protégée* of Charles's had shortened her life.

"Is that you, Lindley?" she asked feebly, as soon as she heard the door creak and caught sight of a man's figure at the other end of the room.

"No, Aunt Eleanor," answered a voice which caused her to start up and shriek, as he made his way, without much alacrity, towards her. He felt it to be quite a relief, after all these cries and flights, when a cold firm hand took his, and his Aunt Elizabeth, who had followed him quickly into the room, said, with a steely smile and in the same tone with which she

would have greeted him after an absence of a couple of days—

"Glad to see you back, James. Come to the fire; you must be cold."

He turned and shook her long white hand gratefully in both his; his dark blue eyes, which were neither large nor brilliant, shining with a responsive light that made his face gentle and attractive at once.

"Thank you, Aunt Elizabeth," he said huskily. And he drew her cold fingers through his arm, and advanced with her to the white hearthrug on to which the poor little invalid had slipped, burying her face in the sofa, and prepared for the end of the world.

"Oh, go away! Heaven forgive you, but don't touch me," she moaned piteously, as the big nephew, for whose guilt-laden soul she had offered up a shuddering prayer each night and morning for the last five years, stooped down and put his arm round her and raised her from the floor less bloodthirstily than she had expected.

"Don't be frightened, Aunt Eleanor; I'm not a ghost," he assured her, in a voice which,

if rather gruff, was gentle; and he tried to place her in a sitting position on the sofa.

But she doubled up limply as soon as he withdrew his arm and took his seat beside her, and his attempts at soothing her were quite ineffectual until Elizabeth's cold voice, saying, "Eleanor, how long is this exhibition going to last?" acted like a charm upon her and reduced her at once to submissive tranquillity. Then the younger lady turned to her nephew. She had had the advantage over the rest of having overheard his voice while in the library, and thus become accustomed to his presence before she was brought into actual contact with him. Quite as much astonished at his return as her sister or Johnson had been, she was more prepared to receive him with tact and kindness, quite genuine of their kind, for she hailed in his return a means of foiling Lindley Fielding.

"You have come back to us at a most unfortunate time, as far as welcome is concerned, as I dare say you have heard, James," she said kindly. "The place is like a dim dungeon full of dreary ghosts, isn't it? But of course this sudden illness of poor Charles has

upset us all dreadfully, and taken the spirit out of us."

James's face clearly expressed his opinion that there had never been much to take out; but he agreed heartily that such a sad event did of course make a place less festive; and she continued—

"At the same time, in some other respects, your arrival could not have been better timed."

Both her nephew and her sister looked up at her, the former curious, the latter apprehensive.

"During your long and most deeply deplored absence, James, I suppose you have not had much opportunity of keeping yourself *au courant* of the affairs of the family?"

"No," said James, shortly.

She went on at once, without giving him time to grow uncomfortable over this allusion—

"I am sorry to say that advantage has been taken of it by certain unprincipled persons to worm themselves into the confidence of your poor uncle, who, you know, was always too confiding and easily influenced."

James assented, remembering how submissive his uncle had always been to her.

"One person in particular, a woman"—James's attention grew—"has so insinuated herself into his affections as to render him utterly insensible to the claims of love and—and duty which ought to bind him to us, his sisters, whose devotion, being a fact of long years' standing, has become a matter of course and of no account." Her nephew expressed becoming astonishment. "I have reason to believe that recently this woman's whole attention has been directed to inducing your uncle to leave to her everything which it is in his power to will away; and quite lately a worthless cousin of ours has made common cause with her, and has managed, by using her influence, to obtain such a hold upon your uncle that he may actually have induced him to acknowledge this girl as his daughter."

"Daughter!" echoed James.

Eleanor started up.

"Oh, Elizabeth, you don't know! I don't believe Lindley——"

"Lindley!" cried James, still more puzzled.

Now Lindley was the last member of the family who had seen James since the departure of the latter from Waringham, nearly six years ago; he and the lawyer, Mr. Massey, having both visited the young man in prison, when he was awaiting his trial for the murder of the Irish farmer Hughes. It was of the utmost importance, therefore, to Elizabeth to know on what terms the two men stood towards each other; for, though the appearance of James would certainly alarm Lindley, on the other hand, the sight of Lindley, if they had not parted on good terms, might alarm James. The circumstances of her nephew's return were still a mystery to her; if he had been formally released, then all was safe, for a few days or hours would make him Sir James, and his generous easy-going nature would make him almost as easy to manage as her brother himself had been; yet, on the other hand, the evident state of depression he was in, his abrupt changes of manner, a certain nervous way of peering around him into the dark corners of the room, pointed to the supposition that he might, after all, have only escaped from

prison, in which case that fact would have to be concealed from Lindley, and the unscrupulous adventurer frightened out of the house, before Sir Charles could be induced to destroy his newly made will; then, though James, being a convict, could not inherit, she and her sister would be safe.

"Lindley Fielding, Aunt Henrietta's son. You remember him?"

"Yes; I remember him."

His tone told nothing. He was looking absently at the fire, with his elbows on his knees and his chin on his hands, quiet, gloomy, and sleepy-looking. His momentary curiosity in the story she was telling him seemed to have died away, and his indifference on such a matter amazed her, until it suddenly occurred to her that this abstraction was the natural result of the enforced reserve of prison-life.

"Have you any objection to seeing him?" hazarded Elizabeth, softly.

"Objection?" repeated James, without looking up. "Oh no!"

Eleanor moved uneasily; her sister quieted her by one cold look.

"We must have a room prepared for you, James; I think the red room will be the most comfortable. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes now, so I will consult Mrs. Symes about your accommodation at once. You had better come upstairs and prepare for dinner, Eleanor."

"Yes, I will come directly, Elizabeth," said the invalid, meekly, beginning to gather up her shawl and book and smelling-bottle. She had a suspicion of what her sister was going to do, and resolved to stay to watch proceedings on Lindley's behalf, if she could manage it.

So Elizabeth left the room alone. A spasm of horror seized the nervous lady at finding herself again *tête-à-tête* with this man who had the guilt of blood upon his head. Conquering it less from kinship or Christian charity than for Lindley's sake, she leant upon her crutch-stick, to say, piercing him with the round black eyes which had, unconsciously to their owner, a weird power of fixing attention—

"James, it is our duty to forgive, even to seventy times seven. As we forgive you the wrong you have done, remember it becomes you to be merciful to others."

The young man, who had risen to bestow upon her the unwelcome little attention of helping her to pack herself up for the journey upstairs, stopped, with her woollen shawl in his hands, and shuddered. Fear and nervousness made the croaking tones which his aunt meant to be entreating hard and didactic; and, if he had been as innocent as a child, the effect her well-meant address had upon him might well have been the same. As it was, however, it seemed to her that he felt the sting of a heavily laden conscience; and, though in fear and trembling, she was too orthodox not to rejoice in having made some effect. Unhappily, it did not soften him. He said, rather impatiently—

"Will you have this shawl on, Aunt Eleanor?"

And, just as she was submitting to have it wrapped very carefully round her bent shoulders, the door creaked again, and they heard two voices and the footsteps of two persons.

As soon as the sound of the man's voice struck James's ears, he started, and his aunt

saw his face change. With wonderful and unexpected energy she hobbled across the room and met her sister and Lindley almost before they had advanced beyond the door, which Lindley closed as they entered.

"Lindley," she croaked, in a hoarse whisper, "do you know who——"

But Elizabeth dragged her aside before she could finish her speech; she had been careful not to give her cousin the least hint that there was any one waiting to see him in the drawing-room but Eleanor.

"What is it?" he asked, as he stepped forward quickly into the room.

The next moment there were heard two short cries in men's voices, one loud and sharp and hissing, the cry of a horrible surprise; the other low, deep, murderous. The frightened women saw the men approach each other quickly; they could not see why or how. Then there was a crash as the lamp was flung down and the light went out; another sound in James's voice, a short pursuit, then something was overturned, and there was silence. The ladies, after a first scream of surprise from

Eleanor, stood quiet as death, staring with straining eyes into the gloom, at first impenetrable, in which the desperate chase was taking place. For Eleanor, who would have rushed shrieking to the door, was held by force by her sister. Until she had had time for a few instants' thought to try to realize what this might mean, Elizabeth dared not summon witnesses; but, as her eyes became accustomed to the gloom, and she saw that the pursuer was the taller figure, which she knew to be that of her nephew, she cried—

"James, for Heaven's sake, speak! What is it?"

And, as she moved towards the door, she was arrested by another sound, and she saw the two figures together, struggling. Then there came a low wolfish cry from a man's lips, her nephew's, and the figures fell. She tried to move, she tried to call, but voice and limbs failed her; she could only stand, with staring eyes and loudly sobbing breath, watching, waiting. In another instant one figure rose, the other and taller after it. With a spring James had the elder man again in his grip—

only for a moment; Lindley struggled out of his coat, flung it over his pursuer's face, and escaped. There was the crash of glass, and James, shaking himself free, rushed to the window. But he only cut himself against the broken glass; the window was still fastened, and no one could have got through the hole made in the glass. He staggered back, with a cry of fury. Then the door creaked; rushing blindly in that direction in the darkness, he was greeted by a discordant duet in the voices of his aunts. Eleanor did nothing but moan and cry; Elizabeth hissed out—

"Stop, James, stop!"

He paid no heed; but, dashing past towards the door, with his back to the faint rays that penetrated into the apartment through the drawn blinds, he ran against the partition which divided the long drawing-room from the smaller one, and staggered back, for the moment partly stunned.

"He went out; I—must—follow him!" he gasped out savagely, as Elizabeth found her way to the bell and rang it sharply.

"No, James," said his elder aunt; "it

was I who opened the door. No one went out."

The feeble lie was transparent, and he did not answer. As he reached the door the butler opened it, and uttered an involuntary exclamation.

"Did you pass any one? Did a man pass you?" asked James, dragging the manservant out into the hall with hands which were shaking with fierce excitement.

"No, sir, no one," said Johnson, beginning to feel sure that imprisonment had affected Master James's intellect.

"Liars, liars every one of you!" growled the young man between his teeth, as he stared about him, blinking in the light, and uncertain which way to go as Johnson made his escape.

His aunt's cold voice from the drawing-room doorway made him turn; and she came out towards him as she spoke.

"Come with me into the library," she said, gravely and with authority. "I have a better, surer weapon against that man than your hand."

Over her left arm hung Lindley's coat,

which he had left in James's hand when the struggle between them grew close. As she spoke, she drew from one of the pockets a small packet of papers held together by an elastic band.

"No," answered James, savagely; "I must be revenged my own way."

But his uncertainty as to which direction had been taken by the man of whom he was in pursuit rendered it easy for her to have her will with him.

There was a cold light of triumph in her hard face as she gently but firmly drew him towards the door of the library, which she opened.

"Come in," she said. "I can promise you that to listen to the few words I have to say will be no waste of your time."

He yielded to the force of the resolute will, and followed her into the library.

CHAPTER XI.

THE fire was alight in the library, Sir Charles's armchair in its customary place; though the housemaid had known, as she wheeled it as usual opposite to that exact spot on the hearth-rug where her master's heels had, in the course of years, worn a hole, that he would never use it again.

Elizabeth was not sentimental. She seated herself without remembrances or regrets in the armchair, and signed to her nephew to take the one by the table. He glanced round him, as he did so, at the old book-shelves and at the names of old books which had made him think in his childhood what a very learned man his uncle must be. In those few moments, while he looked about him, his mind evidently comparing those old impressions with his

present ones, his aunt, occupied solely with the affairs of the moment, quickly took a resolution, and determining that it would be well until matters were more settled to keep her newly acquired secret to herself, she slipped Lindley's packet of papers into her own pocket, and made up her mind to evade any inquiries her nephew might make concerning them.

But he did not seem to be in an inquiring mood. His gaze fell from the books on to the fire, and he sat looking at the glowing coals, as stolid, silent, and inert as if no electric outburst of passion had fired his veins and thundered in his voice a few minutes before. She examined him very attentively for some seconds before she began, with her voice subdued to low tones, as sympathetic as she could make them—

"So this Lindley has wronged you too in some way? Believe me——"

"Lindley!" interrupted James, raising his head abruptly.

"Yes. Don't you know that the man you attacked, or who attacked you—I don't know which—just now, was Lindley Fielding?"

Her nephew got up and leant against the mantelpiece, playing nervously with one of the bronze horses which stood on each side of the clock.

"Lindley Fielding!" he echoed slowly.

"Yes. Who did you think it was?"

"I thought—no, I was sure it was——" He stopped, and stared vacantly at himself in the glass. "I wonder if—if I was dreaming! Perhaps the musty air of this old barn has affected my head. And yet I don't think I could have mistaken that voice, which—— Besides," he cried, suddenly starting erect, "he turned out the light. Why should he do that, except to prevent my seeing him? And I did see him, in spite of his grimaces and his quickness—I tell you I did see him; and it was he—it was Williams, the man who has ruined me body and soul, the man who fawned upon me and humoured me, and wriggled himself into possession of every thought I had, the devil who led me where I was a fool to go. Yes, yes; I know I was a fool," said he, excitedly, staring straight at the wall in front of him, and bringing out his strong voice in a

deep thunder of anger and self-contempt. "I was a weak, miserable fool. But it takes a knave to make such a fool as that man made of me. And I tell you I will have him; I won't be cheated of my revenge now. Let me go, I say, let me go!"

For as he left the mantelpiece and moved towards the door, his aunt's white taper fingers closed firmly upon his arm.

"What is the use of wandering about tiring yourself with hunting for a man you are sure not to find? For, if Lindley Fielding really has so much cause to fear you as you have represented, he is certainly a mile off by this time."

This was so evidently true, and was said in such a sensible tone of calm and authoritative persuasion, that the young man, who was clearly, from some cause or other, in a state of weak mental discipline, yielded again to her, as he had done before, and sank down into the chair he had occupied at the beginning of the interview.

"Now," said she, not resuming her seat, but standing before him with one hand on the

bureau, and speaking very earnestly, "if Lindley should prove to be the man you suspect, you will have my fullest sympathy, and all the help I can give you towards such just punishment as may be in our power. But there is quite another motive he may have had for not wishing you to see him, and I fancy it was this suspicious action of overturning the lamp which led you to mistake him for the man you have so much reason to dislike. Lindley has, as I told you, been plotting to get your uncle to leave the property to a person of his choosing; he would never have dared to do this while you were here, and your return has naturally disconcerted him."

"But not to such an extent as to lead him to do anything hopelessly foolish," said James, looking up at her with more shrewdness in his blue eyes than she had expected. "I know this man Lindley—Williams — whatever his name is. He is as clever as he can stick. If it had been a mere matter of getting an unjust will made, he would have faced it out. It wanted the fear of a pair of hands at his throat to make him raise such a scene as that which

took place in the drawing-room just now. You need not be afraid of his influence over my uncle any longer ; while I am at the Hall he will keep at a safe distance, I'll answer for it."

He spoke with such absolute certainty that she began to recognize the likelihood of Lindley's plots to get the affairs of the family into his own hands having been more deeply laid than she had suspected. Of course, since James had been in prison when the news came of Lindley's charitable visit to him, they had only heard one side of the story. They had sent no word, no message of sympathy or sorrow to the young man in his misery and degradation, except through Sir Charles's solicitor, Mr. Massey ; and James had sent no word back ; therefore, the means by which he had fallen from his bright adventurous manhood to the depths of a cowardly crime had remained unknown to them.

" James," said she slowly, lowering her voice to a solemn whisper, " do you mean to tell me that you suspect some hand of having deliberately set about your ruin ? Be frank with me ; there is no use in making up a story to me.

I have welcomed you without one, and you have my sympathy in any case—my warmest sympathy, my poor, dear boy!"

She laid her white hand—which had wonderful capabilities both for hardness and softness—caressingly on his curly brown hair. But there was wanting in the soft touch just that thrill of warm human feeling which sends the current of sympathy from one heart to another; and James, sensitive, responsive, impressionable, remained unmoved.

"Thank you, aunt," he repeated, instinctively, but without anything warmer than courtesy. "What should I make up a story for?" he continued, simply. "It could not help me now, it is all over with me now; I'm done for; but it was his fault, he did it"—with a fresh outburst of anger. "Heaven knows that is true enough; and Heaven knows what he did it for—I don't!"

"We may be able to find out if we go to work coolly."

"What is the use of that now? His work is done, he has wrecked my life; for Heaven's sake let us talk of something else," said he,

getting up to walk about. "I wanted to forget the miserable business, to come somewhere where nothing was known of it, where I could get——" He stopped short with a laugh, not a merry one. The idea of expecting consolation or welcome or sympathy worth the having in this his old home suddenly struck him in its true light as quite ludicrous in its extravagance.

Now his aunt was burning to hear the whole story, which, if no longer interesting to her nephew, might have considerable practical value for her. She, therefore, with elaborate demonstration of wakening affection in touch and look and tone, followed him, and gently said, as he stopped in front of a book-case, with his eyes fixed intently on the dark volumes of Gibbon's "Decline and Fall"—

"How could you think we should know nothing of it? Did you imagine your welfare —you, the only remaining representative of youth and hope in our decaying family—could be a matter of indifference to us?" He did look down at her then, but it was with a rather cynical expression. However, she went on,

undaunted, "When you disappeared from us so cruelly, without one word, one hint of what you were going to do, we were frantic with anxiety about you; we made inquiries, we searched, we did everything we could to obtain tidings of you. It was a most unfeeling thing for you to do."

There was truth in all this, and James knew it; though, indeed, want of feeling was far from having been the cause of his disappearance.

"Yes, yes, I know it was wrong—I know it was," he said restlessly. "But you can't imagine how intolerable the thought of entering the Church had become to me; even now, I give you my word, I am inclined to think I did better than that." His aunt could not restrain a slight start at this avowal. "I knew I was unfit for it, I knew I could never make you and my uncle consider or understand my scruples; he is too calm by temperament to feel, and you are too good a woman to know them. So, half intentionally, half involuntarily, I drifted off, and—and I did no good, as I suppose you have guessed, as I dare say you prophesied. Even at the last, when I had done something

at college to disprove the gloomy forebodings of my future, which you let me hear so much of when I was a boy, you never gave me credit for much but straight limbs and strong lungs, I fancy."

This was hardly just to the feeling of pride Elizabeth had certainly taken in her nephew when he had outgrown the need of it. But a man down-broken as James now was cannot be just.

"And you see you were quite right," he continued, interrupting her protest. "Nothing you told me when I was a boy, in those friendly little inducements to conscientious effort which began by telling me I was good for nothing, overstepped the truth, I assure you. I think you may reasonably take pride in having judged me so truly, so early."

"James, James, how can you talk in this manner? It is most unkind and unfair. We were overwhelmed when we heard of it—I most of all."

"When you heard of it!" he repeated, turning to look at her. "What did you hear? How did you hear?"

"We heard all about it, of course, in half a dozen ways—Mr. Massey—the papers. You surely did not imagine we had never heard of it!"

"Was it in the papers? I thought, being out of the country—— Well, at any rate, you may congratulate yourselves that it was not a hanging matter; for myself, I give you my word I would rather it had been."

"Hush, hush, James; don't talk like that! Had Lindley—had the man for whom you have taken Lindley anything to do with—that?"

"Why, of course he had!" said James turning upon her with vehemence. "He had everything to do with it; it was he who took her away from me—he, that man who had called himself my friend, who had lived upon me, led me away, done what he liked with me. He has been the curse of my life, and some day—some day—I'll have it out with him yet. He may skulk and hide and creep out of my way, and dodge me and escape me, as a fox does the hounds; but I'll hunt him down at last; and then I'll show him no mercy, if he begs for his life on his knees."

That fixed stare in front of him with which he spoke, as if his eyes actually saw himself in the act of taking a sanguinary revenge, alarmed his aunt much more than his words or the low savage tones of his voice. She had forgotten, until those words—"It was he who took her away"—recalled the fact to her mind, that there had been a woman concerned in the murder, not very creditable to James. The young man, after his angry outburst, seemed to be anxious to recollect his reserve; this was just what she wished to prevent. She said, in her softest voice—

"You were very fond of her?"

"Yes," answered he, briefly; and he passed his hand impatiently over his head, as if to intimate that he wished to shake himself free of the subject. "I should like to see my uncle; can I see him now?" he asked, in a different tone.

"I don't know; the doctor is still with him; but I will go up and find out. Come with me," she added affectionately, putting her hand through his arm, anxious not to lose sight of him until she had an opportunity of broaching

that very delicate subject, the manner of his release or escape from prison.

So they went upstairs together, and he waited outside his uncle's room, while, in answer to Elizabeth's knock, the door was opened by Doctor Ledbury himself. He glanced at James, whom she at once introduced as her nephew. Contrary to her expectation—for she had begun to feel convinced that he was an accomplice of Lindley's—the physician showed no surprise, no more interest than would naturally be expected of a stranger in the circumstances. He came out upon the landing, having closed the bedroom door after him, and said gravely, in his low-voiced, abrupt manner, that he deeply regretted that he could hold out no hope; Sir Charles was sinking fast; he could do nothing further for him; the housekeeper had received from him all necessary instructions. He was bound to return to town that night. Mr. Otway had better not enter his uncle's presence until Sir Charles had been prepared for the sight of him. Mr. Otway would excuse his abrupt departure, as he must not miss his train. He

bowed, and Elizabeth accompanied him downstairs, ordered that the carriage should be brought round at once, and deferentially questioned him about her brother's condition.

For it was impossible, when in the presence of this man, to suspect him of complicity in any plot. In the cold calm face, keen eyes, upright and dignified bearing, there was something which so naturally inspired respect, that the first words she exchanged with him, as they waited in the library for the announcement of the carriage, dispelled her suspicions and made her ashamed of them. As he stood before her, on the very same spot where her nephew had stood a few minutes before, she instinctively compared the two men as furnishing a most striking contrast. Both were tall, broadly built men, with figures denoting great muscular power; but the one moved listlessly, and walked as if the effort of dragging his great limbs about were not worth the trouble it cost him; while every motion of the man before her seemed to suggest the reserved power of a nature whose faculties were all well under the command of an indomitable will. The

faces of the two men illustrated the contrast still more powerfully. Both would have been reckoned handsome, but James's good looks were due more to the gentle, winning expression of his dark blue eyes and somewhat weak mouth than to regularity of feature; while Doctor Ledbury's clear-cut face, from his high fair forehead to the thin-lipped mouth which was almost concealed by a tawny moustache and well-trimmed beard, was classical in outline and firm, perhaps to hardness, in expression.

Curiously enough, as she thought, even at the moment that she was making the comparison, Doctor Ledbury turned the conversation to the man with whom she was mentally contrasting him.

"Is that gentleman whom I had the pleasure of meeting just now the nephew of whom Sir Charles talks as if he were dead?"

Elizabeth looked surprised and anxious.

"Does he speak of him so? Then I am afraid it will shock my brother very much to see him. What would you advise? It is the same; he is our only nephew."

"Poor fellow!" ejaculated the physician, in a very low voice, as if to himself.

Elizabeth looked at him inquiringly.

"Pardon me. I am a judge of faces—to be so is an important part of my profession—and I was painfully struck by the expression of his. Fine young fellow!" he added, more lightly, to turn the subject.

For he had evidently astonished and even alarmed the lady. She said slowly, after a moment's pause—

"May I ask you to tell me in what way his expression struck you? It is a matter of the deepest interest to me; and I should like, if you will be so kind as to gratify my curiosity, to compare your impressions with my knowledge of him."

"Remember, it is a delicate subject for me, as I warn you the impression was a painful one. Besides, I only saw him for an instant."

"Go on, if you will."

"Well, then, in the glimpse I had of him—please remember that it was no more, and we were nearly in the dark—I was almost startled by what seemed to me, if I may use the

expression, a hang-dog look, as if the wearer of it had recently been subjected to some deep humiliation—nay, more—degradation."

Elizabeth started.

"Pardon me, I have pained you. I was afraid I should. Acknowledge that you almost forced my frankness upon me. And, as I said, we were in the dark."

"No, no; I forced you to be frank. Will you go on? Don't be afraid of paining me, I beg; it is only facts and not impressions that can do that. Will you tell me whether it struck you—perhaps I am going too far even for your strange skill—that his expression was one of unmerited humiliation?"

The physician hesitated.

"Ah, of course; it would have needed a magician to tell that!"

"Not quite, I think," he responded. "The human face is much more easily read than people imagine who have only studied it cursorily. I did not pause so much because I could not answer you as because I dared not."

"You may dare any communication to me," said Elizabeth, quietly.

The physician's keen eyes met hers, and a glance told him that her boast was not ill-founded, on this subject, at all events.

"You are strong-minded, madam," he said, in a tone as quiet as her own. "I should have decided, I am afraid, that the degradation expressed in the face of young Mr. Otway was not unmerited."

In spite of the fact that she had been prepared for this, Elizabeth drew a sharp breath as his last words fell. She looked up at him quickly.

"I am afraid of you, Doctor Ledbury—not of the communications you have made to me, for all that you have told me I knew already—but of your wonderful power of reading your fellow-creatures. Can you," she asked timidly, fascinated into almost childish confidence by the physician's skill, and by the enormous sense of reserved power with which he impressed her —"can you read the future too?"

Doctor Ledbury smiled.

"No; only to the extent that we all can. Given a certain type of character, you can prophesy pretty well the course it will take."

"And that course in the case of my nephew is——"

The smile left the physician's face, and he grew suddenly reserved. Elizabeth, who was hanging on his words with eagerness of which she was herself unconscious, felt her heart sink in spite of herself.

"I cannot tell you that," he answered, very gravely and almost inaudibly. He looked towards the door, and glanced at his watch. "You must excuse me, Miss Otway; but——"

"One moment, pray!" she begged, her blue eyes flashing with strange excitement. "Give me one more proof of your skill, I implore you! You have met here—you have seen with my brother—a relative of ours——"

She paused, and Doctor Ledbury looked down searchingly—for every glance of his was searching—into her face.

"And you wish to know what I have read in his expression?"

It was hardly a question—it was an assertion. Elizabeth signed assent, with her lips parted and her breath coming fast.

"I am not hazarding so much in this case,

as I have had the honour of spending some time in that gentleman's society. I may trust in your discretion, Miss Otway?"

"You may, indeed."

"Well, then, don't trust in his."

She trembled. She was going to ask another question, when he turned towards the door and raised his hand warningly.

"I can tell you no more, Miss Otway. I dare say you know a great deal more than a stranger's eyes can read."

And he passed out into the hall just as Johnson was approaching the library to announce that the carriage was at the door. Some strange feeling of superstitious terror seized Elizabeth, already much excited, in spite of her strength of nerve, by her interview with him, as he shook hands with her; and the touch of the cold, firm hand chilled her as the touch of her own had so often chilled others.

She shuddered, with almost a sense of relief, as the door closed, and she heard the carriage wheels roll down the drive, bearing away the physician of the keen eyes and the magnetic touch from Waringham Hall with its gloom and its mysteries.

CHAPTER XII.

When Miss Elizabeth Otway accompanied Doctor Ledbury downstairs, she left her nephew standing irresolutely at his uncle's door, warned not to enter, and indeed unwilling to do so.

He had been quite as strongly impressed as the rest of the household by the physician's striking appearance and reserved, dignified manner, but not in quite the same way. James was a weak man ; but his weakness was moral, not intellectual ; it lay rather in indecision and indolence than in lack of wit. And he was struck by one little peculiarity about Doctor Ledbury which had been unnoticed or differently interpreted by the rest of the family. He sauntered across the landing, leaned over the bannisters, and watched the great man as

he and Miss Elizabeth descended the staircase with dignified steps and disappeared into the outer hall on their way to the library.

It was very curious — very curious, he thought, as he watched the little bald place on the top of the doctor's head over which the fair hair, encouraged to grow long round that spot, was carefully brushed to hide that tell-tale sign of advancing age. Had any one else noticed the one thing about the physician's manner which had attracted his attention? he wondered, as he stood erect and again approached his uncle's door. Doctor Ledbury was a great man, he knew; in every respect but that one his appearance and manners were exactly what one would expect from a man of high intelligence and cultivation, with just that touch of graceful quackery which made him chary of his words, to impress the remembrance that they were valuable, with the low voice that could not disturb the most delicate invalid, the calm face which gave the idea of reserved power. Then where on earth had he picked up that one significant habit?

As James stood by the door of the sick-

room, still uncertain whether he should brave the shock to his uncle by going in alone, or wait for the unsympathetic companionship of his Aunt Elizabeth, a very slight noise made him turn round. The sound, which seemed to come from his uncle's dressing-room, the door of which was the next along the corridor, was so faint that, at a time when his nerves were in a less excited state, he would not have noticed it. As it was, he turned towards the bracket on the wall outside his uncle's door, to turn up the lamp which stood there, and, while doing so, he heard another sound. Glancing back again along the corridor, he saw nothing; but another faint noise, coming this time from the staircase, made him dart across the landing and look down. The hall lamp intercepted his view; but he fancied he saw a man's figure descend the last steps, and go through the door into the outer hall by which his aunt and the physician had passed a few minutes before. However, he could hear nothing.

"Johnson, is that you?" he called out.

There was no answer. The butler had shown so little pleasure in his society, and even,

on the occasion of their last brief interview, so much absolute fear of him, that James could not but feel that it was very likely the old servant might take the liberty of shirking his society. But, on the other hand, it was possible that this flying figure might have been Lindley, who had much stronger reasons for wishing to avoid him. So James hurried down the stairs, through the central into the outer hall, where he paused, for there was no one to be seen. He had heard no door shut; there were voices in the library, but they were those of his younger aunt and Doctor Ledbury. He had already noticed the fact that the drawing-room door could not be opened without creaking; so, those two being the only rooms opening into the outer hall, he went through to the principal entrance, and glanced through the figured glass panels of the door into the darkness outside.

It was not so much a hope that he might find some trace of his enemy in the garden, where the thick night-mist would have made it easy for a fugitive to escape among the trees, as a wish to be out of this sepulchral old home

of his, and to forget its ghastly welcome, that made him open the door and go out into the cold and darkness, with his hands in his pockets and his head raised to the murky clouds, muttering—

"Well, at least the air out here isn't musty!"

But his feet had scarcely touched the gravel when he was arrested by the sight of a girl, whom he recognized by her figure as being the same who had run away at his approach half an hour ago, now running towards him from the gate of the "rose corner" opposite.

"Oh, are you the doctor?" she cried breathlessly, as soon as she was near him.

"Yes," answered James, delighted to escape from his own personality for a few moments, and wishing to detain the girl until he could find out who she was.

She came close to him, and looked up into his face with great pleading eyes, whose beauty he could partly see even in the thick gloom of the closing evening.

"Oh, will you tell me how Sir Charles is? Is he better?" she asked, her voice trembling with anxiety, not noticing that it was a very

strange thing for a doctor to be walking about in the garden without his hat.

"He is very ill," answered James gravely, examining the upturned face as closely as he could, and wishing as he did so that the light was better. For his curiosity was growing; the voice was very sweet, and thrilling with that passionate feeling which the voices which had greeted him indoors so chillingly lacked.

"Very ill! Oh, do let me see him—do, please! Never mind what they say—what his sisters say. He does want to see me; he sent for me, and they would not let me go to him. Ask him, only ask him, if he does not want to see Geraldine." She saw him start, and a thought struck her. "Have they been telling you things about me," she asked fearfully, "saying I am an impostor and greedy and grasping and all that? Indeed, indeed, it is not true! Oh, please believe me—how can I make you believe me? I only want to see him because I love him with all my heart, better, a thousand times better than any one else in the world! He has been more than a father to me, for—for he has done all a father could do for me,

when I had no claim upon him at all. Won't you let me see him? I will do anything in the world for you, if you only will. Oh, don't refuse me; it will break my heart!"

She had seized his hand with little nervous fingers that made his heart leap up in sympathy as soon as he felt her touch. With head turned away from her, he instinctively closed his fingers upon hers with a firm warm answering pressure which told her at once that her pleading was not in vain.

"Then you will take me in; you won't let them stop me?" she whispered, in a low voice of caressing gratitude, as she moved towards the entrance with a great light of relief and eagerness burning in her eyes.

He could see, as the light from the lamp above the entrance now fell upon her, that she was beautiful beyond the promise of her early girlhood; for he knew who she was, knew that the slender sweet-voiced woman with melting dark eyes and gentle manners was the wild and fierce little vagrant with whom he had sat in the mud in Mr. Corbyn's cart-shed nineteen years ago.

"Deldee!" said he below his breath, stepping forward beside the pillar of the portico to call her back as she put her foot on the step.

She stopped, without uttering a word or a sound, shivering and not daring to turn.

"Deldee!" He touched her softly, trying to take her hand.

But she fell back, away from him, deadly white, with frightened eyes that scarcely dared to look in his direction.

"All right, all right!" he muttered, withdrawing his hand abruptly and turning away. And he thrust his hands into his pockets and began to walk down the drive whistling.

He had not turned the corner of the house when Geraldine darted after him, caught his arm, and, as that would not stop him, twisted him round and faced him.

"It is not—you—James?" she asked slowly, still half frightened and uncertain.

"Yes, it is—I—James. But it doesn't matter; it is of no consequence. You will find the doctor, if you go back; he will be coming out in a minute, Miss—er—Miss—" He could not remember the fancy surname

which had been given her, so he stopped short and stared over her head at the trees.

"Oh!" said she, in a voice which brought his eyes down against his will; and hers were full of tears.

"Deldee, Deldee!" he cried hoarsely, seizing her arms with his hands and looking down into her face with the greedy, horrible eagerness of a starving man. "You are not —glad to see me!"

"Glad! Oh, James, I am half crazy with joy!"

She panted out the words in a whisper, trembling still at his touch, not daring quite to believe that it was really he, looking at him inquiringly, already half shyly. He tried to take her in his arms; but she drew back, not coldly, but timidly; then, seeing that he looked half offended at once, she took his right hand in both hers and laughed a little laugh of pleasure.

"It is the first welcome I've had, Deldee," whispered he in her ear, almost sobbing.

She drew nearer to him and pressed his large rough hand against her breast.

"Don't, don't!" she quavered. "You make me so miserable. How could you expect those horrid old witches to welcome you as warmly as your little sister? I don't know what to say to you; I can't think of anything nice enough and kind enough. Do look happier, do be happier. Oh, James, James, I am so happy and so wretched both together that I think I shall go mad! You have seen him?" she whispered, her voice growing anxious again.

"Not yet."

"Won't they let you see him either? Oh, what are they doing to him? I believe there is some plot——"

"So do I. But they can't prevent my seeing him, and they shan't prevent you now. Come along. You remember what you said, that you would do anything for me if I let you see him?" said he, stooping down over her.

"I remember. But I shouldn't have said it if I had known it was you."

"You wouldn't!" He stopped, and made her stop too.

"No, James. Listen!" she said, her voice

low, but deep and thrilling with excitement. "I have something to tell you which I have wanted to tell you all these years; but—but you know I couldn't," she added nervously. "I have thought about it so often, and never dared to say a word about it to any one. You know it was you who were my only companion when I was a child, and you know how good you always were to me and how you gave way to me and yielded to me?"

"Well, that wasn't any merit. You were such a dear little thing, one couldn't help it."

"Oh yes, you were good! I was too young to know it then; but I know it now. And ever since I have been old enough to know it I have been longing—oh, longing so deeply!—for some opportunity of telling you, showing you that I am grateful. And, James," she went on, her excitement growing still higher, "whatever you have done, and whatever you might do, it would be just the same."

The young man heard her with a feeling more dangerous, more stormy than her innocent enthusiasm stirring in his breast, as he looked at her beautiful eloquent face. He was not

a blackguard, this unlucky James Otway, though most respectable people would have put him under that heading. He knew enough of the world and of women to feel sure, without vanity, that this lovely gentle girl, with the sympathy and sweetness for which he had been hungering, was not far from being ready to give him her love: and that he must not take. He gave one rapid glance at her, and, without answering, drew her in the direction of the house.

"Come along!" he said shortly.

But, as he spoke, they heard the carriage drive round to the entrance and the hall door open, and a minute later they had to step back for the barouche to pass them, while Doctor Ledbury put his face to the window and raised his hat.

"Who is that?" asked Geraldine, with curious eagerness.

"That is the great Doctor Ledbury."

"Doctor Ledbury!" she repeated vaguely. "I—I wonder if I have seen him before? I seem to know his face."

"Why, you couldn't see much of it by this light!"

"No-o; I suppose it was fancy."

"I think so. You are nervous to-night; all these shocks and surprises have been too much for you, Deldee," said he, gently.

"Yes, I think they have. When I first saw you, and did not know you, and ran away through that gate, I kept imagining all sorts of horrible things and fancying I could hear my guardian's voice calling to me, and that they were doing him some harm. Oh, James, Waringham Hall is a dreadful place! It is like a great cold prison. I can't bear to think of my guardian's living there, and I don't wonder you ran away! Let us make haste in to him."

They were standing at the corner of the house, James so much fascinated by her innocent warmth of welcome, her soft voice, and the seductiveness of her half-seen beauty, that, on pretext of giving her time to recover her self-possession, he was willing to linger a few minutes longer out there in the night-mist with her.

"Better wait till you have—till you are—till you feel calmer, in fact. It will be very

trying for you, and you must not break down, you know."

He was standing with his back to the house, and Geraldine stood, with his hand placed soothingly on her shoulder, facing him. These last words of his were scarcely uttered when she started violently, and he seized the occasion to slip his arm round her reassuringly.

"It is all right; don't be frightened; I won't let anything hurt you."

"No, I'm not afraid," said she, resisting him faintly. "Let us go in, let us go in; I think my head is giving way."

"Why, child, what is the matter? What frightened you?" he asked quickly.

"I—I fancied I saw a man running away, in the mist, over the grass—away from the house on that side."

She glanced towards the façade of the Hall, and James turned immediately.

"Which way did he go?" he asked, with sudden and fierce excitement.

"I thought—I fancied he ran straight across the grass there, where the flower-beds are; and

then he seemed to make a jump in the air, and to run down the slope."

But James had already left her, crying, "Don't be frightened. Wait; I will come back!" as he ran in the direction she had indicated.

He had not the least doubt that it was the man they called Lindley, the man whom he felt convinced he had known as Williams, whom she had seen escaping. The "leap in the air" she had described him as taking was explained by the fact that a wire fence, invisible to her eyes in the gloom, separated the lawn in front of the house, with its flower-beds, from the rougher, less carefully kept grass of the park beyond.

Now, although the man of whom he was in pursuit was active and muscular, he was somewhat short, somewhat stout, too fashionably dressed to have the free use of his limbs, and twenty years older than James. Therefore, the latter had fair hopes of overtaking him. The ground sloped very gradually the whole way from the Hall to the lodge, and in a few moments James was at the park gates. But

the lodge-keeper said he had seen no one pass out on foot ; he had opened the gates for the carriage a few minutes ago, but he was quite sure there had been nobody inside it but the doctor who had arrived from London an hour or so before. James went back slowly, glancing right and left, peering among the still bare oak trees, angry with himself for having again missed the man whom he persisted in believing to be his enemy. It was not until he was in sight of Geraldine that he remembered her, and quickened his pace.

"Who was it? Did you see any one?" she asked anxiously.

"No, Deldee, I missed him. Well, at any rate, we have only the Gorgons to cope with now," he said, as if trying to throw a weight off his mind. "Let us storm the fortress."

They went up to the entrance, James rang the bell, and the door was opened immediately by the butler, who had by this time recovered his usual stately serenity, and was prepared to treat his master's nephew with the courtly respect due to Sir Charles's heir, having come to the conclusion that Sir Charles's influence

would naturally be strong enough to hush up any little unpleasantness with "the authorities."

"The red room has been prepared for you for to-night, sir," he said, as soon as they were in the hall. "We can get any room you would prefer ready by to-morrow night, if you would please sleep there to-night, sir. We have not had much need of spare rooms lately; but Lord Charmouth slept there when he was here a month ago, and I think you will find it pretty comfortable."

"Thank you; you need not trouble yourself about preparations for me; I'm not going to stay. Just get me something to eat, and have the dog-cart or the phaeton—if either is still in existence—brought round in time to catch the next train to town. You will have to look sharp—it is half-past seven now."

"Very well, sir."

Johnson retired, and at the same moment Elizabeth came out of the library. At sight of Geraldine the expression of anxiety in her face hardened to one of dislike and suspicion. She did not speak to her, however; turning at once to her nephew, she said—

"James, will you come in here for a minute?"

"Will it do if I come in ten minutes, aunt?"

"No, it must be now. It is important—most important."

"Will you wait here for me, Deldee?" he said kindly to the girl, in a low voice. "I can't take you into the drawing-room, because there is another Gorgon there," he added in a whisper, close to her ear.

"Very well. Only don't let her persuade you not to let me see him. You know you have promised, James!" she whispered back imploringly.

"Trust me," he assured her, pressing her arm gently, and giving a lingering affectionate look at her entreating face, prettier than ever in the lamplight, as he followed his aunt into the library.

As soon as he had closed the door behind him, he saw by the look on his aunt's face that it was no light thing that troubled her. Her white skin looked like marble, her eyes were glassy her upright figure shook as she stood

supporting herself with one hand upon the bureau.

"James, I have been robbed!" she said hoarsely.

"Robbed! By whom?"

"The man who was here five minutes ago."

"The doctor! Ah, I am not in the least surprised! I could have sworn he was a gaol-bird!"

"The doctor! Doctor Ledbury! What do you mean, James?"

"Why, that if ever a man had the convict's walk, it is your world-renowned physician, Doctor Ledbury!"

"James, are you mad? Do you know what you are saying—of whom you are speaking?"

"Yes; either of an impostor who is not Doctor Ledbury at all, or else of a man who has once committed a crime, has served his time, begun life again, lived it down, and got on. He is not a young man, you know—but that he picked up that walk in a convict prison I'll swear."

Elizabeth looked startled for a moment; then she laughed a hard laugh. It was

naturally the sort of accusation her unfortunate nephew would bring against any one to whom he had taken a dislike.

"Unhappily for your theory, you have made it to fit the wrong man. It is not Doctor Ledbury who has robbed me—yes, and robbed you—but Lindley, the man you met in the drawing-room, the man you declared to be your enemy. Well, if you were mistaken then, you would be right now."

"What has he stolen?" asked James, with deepest attention.

"Papers—whether genuine or forged I don't yet know—but which concern us all most deeply. He had them with him when he was shut in with your uncle; then he showed me two of them boastfully, and I tell you they were of vital importance. In your struggle together, he left his coat in your hands, and I picked it up and took out the papers. Then, a few minutes ago, as Doctor Ledbury had left in fact, I came in here and took them out of my pocket to read, having first locked the door. Suddenly Lindley, who must have slipped into the room when I went out

with the doctor, darted from behind the screen, seized the papers, and made off through the window, wrenching himself out of my grasp as I tried to stop him. Of course I dared not call out. There—you can see where his foot went."

She walked to the nearest of the two French windows, which were about a foot from the floor, opened it, and showed her nephew the traces of Lindley's descent on the narrow flower-bed which ran the length of the front of the house, close under the wall.

James took it very coolly.

"Yes; Geraldine saw him," he said, nodding at the flower-bed. "But I couldn't catch him. I think he must have hidden himself somewhere among the trees, for I know his boots are always too tight for him to run very fast."

"But what are we to do?" she asked, in consternation.

"We can't do anything. He's got away, you see; and you can't do much to a man who is out of reach."

"But the papers?"

"You say that they were his?"

"Yes, but they concerned us—you."

"Well, then, we must wait till he turns up with them. He can't do much with any papers unless he produces them himself; and then, whatever they might contain, I should think that a cheap bargain which put him within reach of my hands," said James, the savage look coming again into his eyes.

"But I tell you they would ruin you!" cried she, irritated by his lack of energy and interest.

"No, no, aunt; that has been done," said he, sinking into sullen indifference.

"Well, then, think of us. Lindley holds papers which, if they are genuine, or if the forgery is clever enough, will leave Eleanor and me without a penny."

James looked puzzled. At last he said—

"Look here, Aunt Elizabeth—instead of worrying yourself about Lindley and his papers, why don't you go up to my uncle and ask him about it? If it concerns you and me and Aunt Eleanor, I suppose it concerns him, and he is the only person who is likely to be able to help you."

But she hesitated.

"If," she began, and stopped.

James rose. He hated mysteries, and he would at all times rather have let everything he possessed slip through his fingers than have bothered himself about papers and documents.

"I don't see how you can expect a man you know to be a scamp, and his confederate, to play hide-and-seek all over the house without helping themselves to something. If he has taken nothing but a few papers of his own concoction, you may think yourselves lucky. If I had been here when his 'doctor' came, I would have told Johnson to keep an eye on the plate-basket."

Elizabeth pursed up her lips.

"I am not a girl, James, without judgment or discrimination. There was no need to warn me against Lindley Fielding; and, if there had been, Doctor Ledbury himself, whom you call his confederate, told me not to trust him."

"Oh yes, that is an old trick!" said James, who was stubborn and didactic in argument. "'I'll run after him and see if he's got it, ma'am,' says the thief who has the lady's purse in his pocket of the 'pal' who 'covered' him

while he took it." This simile, savouring so strongly of her nephew's recent associations, made Elizabeth shudder. "I tell you," he went on, not noticing the effect his words had upon his aunt, "at some time or other in his life that man has been a convict—and surely I ought to know better than you!"

The cynical coolness with which he uttered the last words appalled the lady, who would fain have put the hideous fact of his crime and its punishment out of sight as long as he should remain in her society. But these two matter-of-course allusions seemed to argue that he had lost all sense of shame both at his imprisonment and its cause. She was glad when he walked towards the door, saying—

"I am going up now to see Uncle Charles, and, if he is well enough, I will try to find out all I can for you."

"One moment, James. Are you going to take that girl up with you?"

"Geraldine? Yes," said he, decisively.

"Very well. I know you will not listen to me; the affection of an old aunt who has loved you since your childhood does not weigh

a feather's weight against one smile, one whisper from a young girl. But I tell you, and you may remember it some day when she has drained you as she has done your uncle, when she has robbed you as she has robbed us, that this girl whom you are now taking, perhaps to disturb your uncle's last moments, has been the curse of all our lives!"

James had stopped at the door, and, as he listened, a change came over his face, and his lounging, careless attitude gradually gave place to one more attentive, more erect. As she finished speaking, he turned his eyes from the lamp, at which he had been staring in the fixed way usual with him when excited by any strong emotion.

"Aunt," he said, in a low, full voice that enforced attention, "you are falling from one mistake into another. If, as you describe, you had really 'loved me since my childhood,' there would not be in the world a girl with a smile or a whisper sweet enough to make me act against your wishes—reasonable or unreasonable. I am easy enough to lead, Heaven knows! But you never did love me—never took the slightest

interest in me till I began to bring home prizes and be talked about as a smart lad. Of course I was bullied and snubbed 'for my good,' and that it was my natural perversity which made me resent it. And I know too that I should be overstating the case if I were to say that I disappeared from you all because of your unsympathetic hardness, and that, if I had had a sweeter home to remember, I might have—might have lived a life less unworthy of it. I—I don't know about that. But I do know this, that, if you were to turn from this moment into an angel of sweetness to me, I could never forget your unkindness to me in my boyhood or your cold welcome this evening. And if that little girl, now shivering in the dungeon outside there, were to change into a demon and to tear my eyes out, why, I would feel my way sightless to her little hands and kiss them for the sake of those few words, 'James, I'm glad to see you!' which she spoke to me in the garden just now." His voice broke towards the end, and his eyes, which had wandered away from his aunt again, grew moist and shining. Then he gathered himself together,

cleared his throat, and, saying simply, "I'll be down again in a few minutes, aunt, and tell you what he says," he left the room.

Geraldine, who had been walking about the hall to avoid hearing what they said through the door as their voices rose, turned and looked at him apprehensively; but he was very soft-mannered and gentle, and was smiling and looking happier than she had seen him yet since their meeting.

"Tired of waiting, Deldee?" he asked, as he drew her hand through his arm, and bent down to smile into her face as he led her through the inner hall and up the staircase.

"Oh no!" she replied in a whisper. Her excitement was rising as the longed-for moment of meeting her guardian drew near. "I—I heard you speaking so loudly; I was afraid you were angry about something."

"Yes, I had turned the tables and was bullying my aunt. It has done me good," said he.

They were at the top of the staircase now. She was trembling so much that for a few seconds she could not have stood steadily without his support. She seemed, however, at that

time unconscious of his presence, for he saw her eyelids fall and her lips move, and he held his breath and stood like a statue, lest the remembrance of his being there might disturb her silent prayer. Then she stepped forward more calmly, as he led her to the door of his uncle's room and knocked. In a few instants the housekeeper's slow steps were heard, and Mrs. Symes opened the door and presented a face whose lean and withered old features were still distorted and ghastly from the alarms and surprises of which she had seen and heard more than any one else that night. She had evidently heard of James's arrival, for, on seeing him, she only uttered one moaning ejaculation, and then she looked at the unknown lady.

"How is he now, Mrs. Symes?" asked James. "Is he conscious?"

"Yes, sir, he is conscious, I believe; but he's sinking rapid."

Geraldine drew a long breath of agony, but uttered no other sound. James could not bear to look at her face.

"You go in first, my child," he whispered. "Mrs. Symes, you ask if he will see her."

"Who shall I say, sir?"

"Say, 'Will you see her?'"

The old housekeeper left the door ajar as she approached the bed and drew aside the curtain so that they could see the face of the sick man, who was lying back half raised on a heap of pillows with his eyes closed, quite still. At sight of him James felt that a thrill shot through the frame of the girl whose hand he still held in his arm.

"Will you see her, sir?" they heard the old woman say slowly and without intelligence.

But quick as thought the sick man opened his eyes, and a great radiance of light and joy seemed to beam from his pale face. The housekeeper moved aside. Geraldine slipped away from her companion and softly crept in and up to the bedside. Gently she clasped her arms round him and pressed her lips to the lined, worn face; but the beloved touch sent an electric thrill of strength to the dying man's paralyzed frame. He moved one arm, which she drew tenderly up to her neck, and, with faltering but distinct speech, he cried—

"My daughter, my own—own child!" And,

after a moment, he whispered less clearly, "Call —me father! Say it—quick!"

"My father!" whispered the girl, whose tears were falling fast in spite of herself.

"Don't cry, child! James will—take care —of you. James—James!"

On hearing his uncle, whom he had believed to be unconscious of his vicinity, call him by name, James almost staggered. Then, recovering from the shock of his surprise, he slowly and gravely entered the room. He was close to the bed before Sir Charles, who was still gazing lovingly at Geraldine, raised his eyes and saw him. To the horror of them all, the sick man struggled up and stared at his nephew with a cry of amazement and terror; the next moment, still with one arm round Geraldine's neck, he fell back upon his pillows—dead!

END OF VOL. I.

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